

# REPRESENT

## Asian American Representation is a National Security Imperative

JANUARY 2022

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*Represent is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. Aimee Yan, addresses the effects of Covid-19 on the Asian American community, often resulting in increased violence and racism. Yan offers five powerful policy solutions and changes to strengthen America and invest in Asian Americans.*

### IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 AND ANTI-ASIAN RHETORIC AND VIOLENCE

As Covid-19 wreaked havoc across the United States, an epidemic of racially motivated violence and vitriol against Asian Americans also surged. Anti-Asian hate crimes dramatically increased [more than 73 percent in 2020](#), compared to hate crimes in general which saw a 13 percent rise. [More than 9,000](#) anti-Asian incidents have been reported since the pandemic began, including verbal harassment, shunning, and physical assault. The devastating [Atlanta spa shootings](#) that left six Asian women dead opened the nation's eyes to the persistent, intersectional racism and gender-based violence Asian American women face. An epidemic of Covid-19 related racism towards Asian Americans has also taken root in the national security field, contributing to an atmosphere of [fear and mistrust within the U.S. national security apparatus](#).

Internal hostility not only harms Asian Americans, it threatens the national security field's ability to defend and represent the nation it serves. Over the coming decades, the United States must dramatically increase the recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce with expertise in China and the Asia-Pacific to respond to increasing competition and aggression in the region. As stated by [Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin](#), China is our "number-one pacing challenge as it seeks to reshape the international order." To contend with the threat of a rising China, the intentional recruitment, retention, and inclusion of Asian Americans with linguistic and cultural understanding of the region is a national security imperative.

### UNDERREPRESENTATION BY THE NUMBERS

Asian Americans contribute invaluable human capital to the national security field, but remain underrepresented in the workforce and neglected in conversations on diversity and inclusion. Asians make up about [7 percent of the nation's population](#), which is projected to grow from 22.4 million in 2019 to over 46 million by 2060. However, within the U.S. military, Asian Americans comprise only 4 percent of active and reserve enlisted personnel even though they represent 7 percent of eligible U.S. civilians. A similar pattern is evident in the Intelligence Community (IC), in which Asians comprised only 4.3 percent of the IC workforce in FY 2020 (and a somewhat higher) 6.1 percent of the federal workforce, according to a [2020 IC Demographic Report](#). The gap between these numbers points to barriers and factors other than interest or public service motivation deterring Asian Americans from pursuing careers in national security. Disparities within representation among the officer corps and leadership positions are even more stark: Asians comprise only [5.2 percent of officers and at senior levels](#); the gap widens further with Asians representing only 1.8

percent of General Officers or Flag Officers. These numbers demonstrate the dearth of diversity and meager Asian representation in the national security sector despite a rapidly growing Asian American population.

## RESPONDING TO THE GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE: CENTRALITY OF CHINA AND ASIA-PACIFIC REGION TO NATIONAL SECURITY

An inadequate representation of Asian Americans in the national security field, especially among higher ranks, poses a significant threat to U.S. security interests in China and the Indo-Pacific. Long-term trends in the centrality of East Asia to U.S. national security necessitate greater recruitment and retention of Asian American personnel with robust linguistic and cultural understanding of the region. The Biden administration's [2021 Interim National Security Strategy](#) emphasizes strategic competition with an increasingly assertive and authoritarian China as a primary national security objective, calling for greater investment in our people to combat the China threat. To do so, the United States must invest in a more diverse workforce, leveraging the strategic human capital, skills, and expertise that Asian Americans bring to the table to contend with a rising China.

Lessons learned from Afghanistan and Iraq must be applied to the strategic competition with China. The [failure to predict 9/11](#) was due in part to an absence of a diverse national security workforce resulting in miscalculations, blind spots, underestimation of the al-Qaeda threat, and an acute shortage of Arabic speakers. Following the [Department of Defense's failure](#) to warn against the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Department [dramatically increased its recruitment](#) of experts with Middle East and counter-terrorism experience. Rather than waiting for potential conflicts to occur, the United States should anticipate future threats and take action immediately and preemptively to cultivate a more heterogeneous national security workforce capable of engaging with China. This means recognizing pressing gaps in human capital within the national security field, specifically a lack of Asian heritage language speakers with firsthand cultural understanding of East Asia.

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Asian American personnel can help fill the unmet need for critical language capabilities. The Foreign Service Institute categorizes Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin) as [exceptionally difficult languages](#) for native English speakers to learn, costing tens of thousands of dollars and 2,200 hours of State Department-sponsored training to master. Foreign-born Americans and heritage language speakers can provide critical language capabilities at no cost to the government. In fact, bilingual speakers often bring greater mastery of languages and a more nuanced understanding of words in context.

The benefits of diversity are numerous and extend beyond enabling the United States to engage in strategic competition with China. Diversity is broadly important because it [promotes creativity, inhibits group-think, demystifies other cultures, and enhances problem-solving abilities](#) that are critical to achieving security objectives. Importantly, diversity helps counter mirror-imaging, which refers to the assumption that our nation's adversaries think and act like we do. Mirror-imaging has been described as [“the greatest single defect in U.S. intelligence analysis accounting for multiple intelligence failures including the Cuban Missile Crisis, Pearl Harbor, the Vietnam War, and the fall of the Shah of Iran.”](#)

Achieving diversity among public servants is critical to American interests and the national security field should take steps to ensure the recruitment, retention, and active inclusion of Asian Americans.

## DISCRIMINATION IN ASSIGNMENT RESTRICTION POLICIES

Despite the numerous benefits diversity offers in securing national security objectives, anti-Asian discrimination in the State Department's assignment restriction policies risks driving away those Americans best-equipped to respond to the China threat. Assignment restrictions prevent diplomats from serving in a particular country, working on files

related to the country, or accessing classified information. According to a [State Department policy manual](#), assignment restrictions limit a diplomat's security clearance to prevent "potential targeting and harassment by foreign intelligence services as well as to lessen foreign influence and/or foreign preference security concerns."

Asian Americans have been [disproportionately denied security clearance through assignment restrictions](#) over concerns surrounding loyalty and susceptibility to foreign influence. [A statement signed by over 100 AAPIs working in foreign policy and national security](#) asserts that the prejudice they face in the field has intensified due to "Covid-19 pandemic and the geopolitical and economic strains and racial polarization it has surfaced." The statement continues, "the xenophobia that is spreading as U.S. policy concentrates on great power competition [with China] has exacerbated suspicions, microaggressions, discrimination, and blatant accusations of disloyalty simply because of the way we look...Treating all Asian-Americans working in national security with a broad stroke of suspicion, rather than seeing us as valuable contributors, is counterproductive to the greater mission of securing the homeland."

A survey conducted by the Asian American Foreign Affairs Association (AAFAA) in 2020 revealed that 70 percent of members (n=132) believe the department's assignment restriction process is biased, with a significant 30 percent of respondents noting that they had assignment restrictions placed on them. Three out of four members with restrictions said they were not provided with reasons for the decision. Of those who received reasons, nearly half said the decisions included "[outright factual errors](#)," including incorrect assertions of family members living in China and restrictions imposed over parents despite having fled China following the Communist takeover. If left unanswered, the ongoing discrimination in assignment restrictions will further alienate Asian Americans in the field and discourage others from pursuing national security careers.

The unwarranted indictment of the entire Asian American community breeds distrust and suspicion that is counterproductive to the national security field's greater mission of defending the homeland. Asking Asian Americans to prove their loyalty without evidence to the contrary is anathema to American values, and risks driving away those best-suited to counter Chinese aggression. The national security field must take action to promote "we" rather than "them" mentalities that treat Asian Americans as "the other". Historical failure to do so has resulted in the exclusion of Asians from the United States, including through the Chinese Exclusion Act and internment of Japanese Americans during WWII. Groundless discrimination against Asian Americans by the State Department in assignment restriction policies and the national security field at large reinforces a damaging view of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners in their own country.

## **PRACTICING OUR VALUES AT HOME IS A PREREQUISITE TO STANDING FOR THEM ABROAD**

Equality of opportunity and the active inclusion of Asian Americans plays a critical role in U.S. public diplomacy. Covid-linked anti-Asian rhetoric, surges in hate crimes, and increased violence during the pandemic undermine U.S. credibility on human rights issues abroad. The Biden administration's [Interim National Security Strategy](#) states that the United States "will stand up for democracy, human rights, and human dignity, including in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet." As a nation, it is contradictory to stand for democracy, human rights, and human dignity abroad until we ensure every American's ability to fully participate in our own democracy.

The persistence of violence, scapegoating, career discrimination, and systemic racism that threaten the rights of Asian Americans domestically also undercut the United States' legitimacy on the world stage. For example, following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis last year, Russian President Vladimir Putin [deflected criticism](#) of his government's treatment of a pro-democracy group by invoking the United States' domestic racial turmoil.

Li Haidong, a professor at the Institute of International Relations of China Foreign Affairs University, [claims](#) that blindness to internal racism demonstrates the United States' hypocrisy amid attempts to rejoin the United Nations Human Rights Council following the Trump Administration's withdrawal in 2018. Our nation's failure to address police brutality, systemic racism, and racial discrimination opens the door for other countries to undermine our credibility on human rights violations abroad. Haidong [states](#) that "despite its human rights abuses, the U.S. still condescendingly accuses others of violating human rights, using the issue as a card to provoke countries such as

China. It continues shamelessly because American elites don't think there is any problem that they have to address at home.”

More recently, China released a report in March that countered U.S. accusations of human rights abuses by China’s ruling Communist Party. In this report, [China deflected U.S. criticism on abuses against minority groups in Xinjiang and Tibet and the repression of opposition voices in Hong Kong](#)—criticizing American “political disorder, interethnic conflicts, and social division.” The report criticizes the United States’ inequitable handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, stating that, “the United States, which has always considered itself an exception and superior, saw its own epidemic situation go out of control...Vulnerable groups became the biggest victims of the government’s reckless response to the epidemic.”

Thus, racism and discrimination against Asian Americans is alarming not only from a human rights and civil liberties perspective, but also in the interests of overall national security. If left unanswered, mistrust, xenophobia, and anti-Asian sentiment have the potential to [bolster Chinese information operations campaigns](#), undermining the United States’ ability to achieve national security objectives.

## POLICY SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in the national security field, leaders should make systematic efforts to improve the recruitment and retention of Asian Americans in addition to fostering a culture of inclusion and fair equality of opportunity for all.

### **Proactive approaches to recruitment of students of color**

The national security field must take steps to address the lack of awareness about career opportunities among diverse candidates. The government should increase educational opportunities and recruitment programs to students of color that funnel them into future careers in national security. Agencies should also take steps to establish relationships with federal fellowship and scholarship programs that target underrepresented students, like the [Stokes Educational Scholarship Program](#) (NSA), to diversify recruitment pools. The [State Department](#) only offers unpaid internships, which poses a massive barrier for low-income students, particularly those from underrepresented communities, to pursue careers in national security. Improving the dismal diversity records of many federal agencies requires increased opportunities for the least represented to enter the national security field.

### **Diversify who is in charge of hiring and promotion decisions**

Decisions on hiring and promotion are often made by boards that lack racial and gender diversity. For example, within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the [Career Development Board draws members from management ranks](#) that severely lack Asian American representation. Diversifying the decision makers responsible for selecting the next generation of national security leaders will increase leadership opportunities for Asian Americans and other underrepresented groups.

### **Anticipating demands for individuals with linguistic and cultural experiences**

Rather than waiting for conflicts to occur, national security organizations should anticipate demands for individuals with linguistic and cultural experiences. This entails recruiting Asian heritage language speakers to ensure that expertise is available when conflicts arise. Additionally, the [Defense Language and National Security Office](#) (DLNSEO) should take action to require all service members to complete the Regional Proficiency Assessment Tool (RPAT), which helps commanders identify personnel with regional knowledge and foreign linguistic abilities. However, DLNSEO should reform the RPAT so that it doesn't [favor formal education over informal learning and heritage experiences](#).

## Reforming the assignment restrictions process

To address discrimination against Asian Americans in State Department assignment restrictions, Congress should pass the [2021 State Authorization Act](#), which has bipartisan support. This bill/law would give diplomats the right to an independently reviewed appeal within 60 days of assignment restrictions. Reforms instituted in 2016 to increase transparency and strengthen the appeals process [failed to be implemented fully under the Trump Administration](#). Secretary of State Antony Blinken or lawmakers have the power to implement reforms ensuring that the appeals process takes place outside of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security—which makes original assignment restriction decisions. Further, an officer responsible for diversity and equity should be included on any appeals panel to address persistent discrimination which erodes morale and threatens national security.

## Change organizational culture to be more inclusive of Asian Americans and other underrepresented groups

Broadly, national security leaders must cultivate organizational cultures that are inclusive of Asian Americans and other underrepresented groups. Policies to recruit and retain a diverse workforce will only be effective if people of color feel comfortable voicing concerns and calling attention to (DEI-related) problems. [Investing in diversity training, changing grievance and complaint systems, and being more accommodating and informed about cultural and religious holidays](#) are important steps to cultivating an inclusive organizational culture. Ensuring inclusion can [contribute to an organization's performance and talent retention](#), enhancing their ability to achieve national security objectives.

## CONCLUSION

First, we should promote diversity in the national security field because it is a moral imperative, and it makes us better. Communities impacted the most by domestic terrorism, violence, and hate crimes should be at the forefront of solving those issues. Discrimination against Asian-Americans is deeply un-American. The national security field should act in accordance with its core values of fair equality of opportunity and advancement for all Americans.

Secondly, we should pursue diversity because it is in the best interests of defending our nation. The threat of a rising China demands that the United States diversifies its federal defense workforce, cultivates inclusive organizational cultures for Asian American personnel, and dismantles systemic racism that undermines our credibility to stand for American values abroad.

The underrepresentation of Asian Americans in the national security field represents a serious national security and equity issue. It is more important now more than ever to recruit and retain a diverse workforce with the linguistic and cultural skills necessary to make informed policy decisions regarding the increasingly influential strategic region of East Asia. However, this means addressing anti-Asian bigotry that threatens to drive away those Americans the U.S. national security apparatus needs the most right now.

*The views and opinions expressed in this article belong solely to the author. They do not represent people, institutions, or organizations with which the author is associated and are not intended to malign any person or group.*

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