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Tony Blinken: A Dedicated Atlanticist

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Joe Biden's decision to appoint Tony Blinken as Secretary of State provides an important insight into the approach the new President intends to adopt for his foreign policy. It also says a lot about his concept of governing.

I have known Tony Blinken for over 20 years. He is very competent, but also unassuming and very approachable. And he is one of the most accomplished public officials I have met in over 30 years of government service. He is also one of the most committed multilateralists in Washington. And by the way, at age 58 he is also the father of two toddlers.

The head of the State Department is the senior member of the President's cabinet. The Secretary of State is usually chosen from the ranks of senior politicians, successful lawyers or in recent times well-known woman professors. However, Joe Biden seems to be basing his choices more on trustworthiness and competence.

Tony Blinken started in government over 25 years ago in the European Bureau of the State Department, coincidentally under my leadership, and left Federal Service in 2017 as Deputy Secretary of State. In

between, he occupied an uninterrupted series of important foreign policy positions.

Also relevant is the fact that Tony Blinken served several years as foreign policy advisor to Senator Joe Biden and later before going back to the State Department, as Chief of staff for Foreign Policy for Vice President Biden in the White House. As a result, Tony Blinken will without doubt be one of the most knowledgeable practitioners of foreign policy in all of its aspects ever to serve as Secretary of State.

Over the years, Blinken and Biden have made no secret of the close trust and friendship which joins them. From the beginning, it was obvious that Tony Blinken would be offered one of the important roles in foreign policy, as was also the case with Jake Sullivan, who will be national security advisor.

Also important is the fact that Tony has many personal connections to Europe. His perfect French resulted from the years at school in Paris which he spent with his mother and her second husband, the late attorney Samuel Pizar. Pizar was a human rights advocate who had survived both the Majdanek and Dachau Nazi concentration camps as a boy, and escaped during a death march in 1945.

After Pizar's death in 2015, Joe Biden wrote in his eulogy suggesting that Samuel Pizar's autobiography should be obligatory reading for younger generations. He said it served as a reminder that we can never forget our obligations to the past.

Tony's father is of Ukrainian and German-Jewish heritage and was American Ambassador in Budapest during the Clinton Administration. His stepmother was born in Hungary.

In other words, Europeans should be more than satisfied with the choice. More importantly, I can report from personal experience that Tony is not only one of the warmest and most approachable persons one can meet, but he is also undoubtedly the most committed Atlanticist ever to hold the position of Secretary of State. To him there is no question that the United States cannot prosper without maintaining a close community with Europe.

Joe Biden's deliberate approach to building his new Administration reveals his careful nature. He has avoided the triumphalism of the Barack Obama team who entered office believing that they had engineered a permanent cultural revolution. And Biden has of course rejected the bombastic confrontation which has characterized every minute of Donald Trump's time in office. Instead, he has been calm, systematic and perhaps purposely even a bit boring as he goes about his task of forming a government.

It was certainly no accident that he began by announcing choices for agencies such as the State Department, Homeland Security, intelligence coordination and the Treasury which form the foundation of American well-being. Without exception, his new appointees were accomplished persons with long experience in their fields and in government, who were meant to project skill and trust.

Several also reflected the new America Biden hopes to help build. Ambassador to the United Nations will be an African-American woman who has served more than 30 years in the US Foreign Service. The new coordinator of Foreign intelligence is a retired female Admiral with long experience in the field. More dramatic is the choice of Cuban-born Alejandro Mayorkas to head the Department of Homeland Security. Immigration and refugees will be among his important duties.

That of course does not mean, as Joe Biden often stresses, that things will return to “normal,” whatever that may be. There have been many upheavals during the past ten years, and not all of them can be blamed on Donald Trump.

However much Tony Blinken may value Atlantic ties, a new generation of American elites have lost patience for the statecraft necessary to maintain a complex community of many cultures on two sides of the Atlantic. Much of the criticism that Trump delivered in his harsh manner, was presented also by the Bush and Obama administrations in a more restrained way. Mostly without effect.

For example, I recall how perplexed members of President Obama’s team were after the cool German reaction to his speech in Berlin in June 2013, which offered a transactional partnership for dealing with 43 global problems (I counted them), but never once mentioned the European Union. And in return, then Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble seemed never to understand why the German trade surplus was such a big issue in Washington, or in the rest of the EU.

Europe is experiencing its own brand of populism and is falling behind in the race for influence in the digital world. Its citizens are frustrated and unhappy and are asking Washington not to make too many demands on them.

The former French Ambassador to Washington, Gerard Araud summed up his concerns about the new team: “You have people who are competent, but from competence to policy there’s always a leap. Are they going to simply manage the status quo? Are they going to go back — to rewind? Or are they going to be creative — to have an America that’s more cooperative, less imperial?”

Or listen to what Tom Wright from the prestigious Brookings institution wrote in Atlantic magazine: “Biden’s Administration will probably present the establishment with its last chance to demonstrate that liberal internationalism and not populist nationalism remains the best strategy.”

In the current climate, it will not be Tony Blinken’s fault if these hopes are difficult to realize. But these commentaries help us to understand that Tony Blinken’s success with Europe will depend less on expertise or on Biden’s long political experience, and more on the President’s ability to construct a new narrative which can make the Western community more relevant to the emotional needs felt so deeply by citizens on both sides of the Atlantic.