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# *Biden's Foreign-Policy Team Takes Shape*

*It won't be Obama's third term, but expect establishment virtues and a  
climate focus.*

By Walter Russell Mead



*Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks to the press in Washington, Aug. 10, 2016.*

**The news that President-elect Joe Biden is expected to nominate Antony Blinken as secretary of state and to appoint Jake Sullivan as national security adviser speaks volumes about the next era in U.S. foreign policy.**

For one thing, it illustrates that the Biden presidency will not be a third term for the Obama foreign-policy team. Mr. Blinken has a decades long history with Mr. Biden, and, like Mr. Sullivan, served Vice President Biden as his national security adviser during the Obama years. As a former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a hands-on vice president, Mr. Biden comes to the White House with more foreign-policy experience than any post-World War II president besides Dwight Eisenhower and George H.W. Bush. America's new foreign policy will have Mr. Biden's fingerprints all over it; the president-elect knows what he wants and is choosing a team he believes can deliver it.

The second, related point the appointments make is that Joe Biden has turned to what Obama adviser Ben Rhodes famously called “the Blob”—**experienced foreign-policy insiders who work comfortably within the key assumptions that have guided U.S. foreign policy since the late 1940s.** The members of the new Biden team have worked with many of their peers and counterparts abroad. Mr. Blinken and the likely new defense secretary, Michèle Flournoy, worked together during the Trump years at WestExec Advisors, a corporate consulting firm they helped found whose blue-chip client list and ties to Silicon Valley attracted progressives’ ire. This is not the Squad’s dream team, but the president-elect seems untroubled by that perception.

That said, nobody should mistake this for a Republican administration. Mr. Biden’s expected nominees may be centrists, but it is the Democratic mainstream in which they swim. They are, for example, multilateralists not out of pragmatism (like, say, James Baker and George H.W. Bush), but out of conviction. They are not fanatics, and can be flexible when they must. But for Team Biden, **enhanced international cooperation embodied in rule-driven multilateral institutions** is the path, and the only path, to control what many Democrats see as existential menaces to civilization—e.g., nuclear proliferation, great-power wars and climate change.

As the appointment of former Secretary of State John Kerry as “climate czar” makes clear, it would be a great mistake to underestimate the new team’s commitment to addressing this last item. As they see it, climate change is not only a direct threat to international peace and American well-being; it is an issue that links the administration’s foreign and domestic policies and offers an opportunity to split progressive greens away from more isolationist, anticorporate voices on the Democratic left. Linking a global push for an accelerated transition to a net-zero carbon economy (in the relatively distant future) with a domestic infrastructure program focused on green energy can, the new team believes, energize a coalition behind Biden-style centrism at home and abroad.

This much of the Biden agenda will be warmly welcomed across Europe. A greener, more multilateral U.S. offers an opportunity to renew the trans-Atlantic alliance that the new team will be quick to embrace.

American foreign-policy's focus, however, will continue to shift toward the Indo-Pacific. This is very much a "pivot to Asia" foreign-policy team that's likely to pursue a more robust policy in the East than the Obama administration did. The new team's critique of Trump-era China policy was on means more than ends. Poor relations with allies, particularly in Europe, meant Team Trump couldn't marshal a united front on economic matters with China. In Team Biden's view, this was a fatal flaw that undercut the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Globally, besides Iran, which will hope for a return to some version of the nuclear agreement, Germany and Japan are probably the chief beneficiaries of the coming shift in U.S. policy. Berlin can expect a renewed close partnership with Washington. Haggling over its NATO contribution and trade surplus will be off the front burner as America recommits to the multilateral and green goals dear to German hearts. Tokyo can expect continued close support from the U.S. in the face of the China challenge from a less volatile administration with, again, a less mercantilist trade policy.

Despite Mr. Blinken's fluent French and deep knowledge of the country, France may be a loser in the shift. France has long chafed under Germany's clear preference for trans-Atlantic security cooperation over efforts to make the European Union autonomous in defense. With Donald Trump in the White House, French arguments about American unreliability found receptive ears in Berlin. While a 2024 Trump restoration cannot be ruled out, the French case for European defense cooperation could seem a little less urgent on the far side of the Rhine.

**The new U.S. foreign-policy leadership is less a team of rivals than a reunion of friends.** Let us wish them the best as they prepare for the challenges of leading the world's greatest power through a stormy and tumultuous time.