

Senate hearings for Biden's security cabinet expose bipartisan unity on war and reaction

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On the eve of an inauguration speech in which newly sworn-in President Joe Biden invoked the need for unity nearly a dozen times, the Senate conducted confirmation hearings for key nominees for his security cabinet. The tenor of these sessions made it clear that a principal foundation for unity between the incoming administration and a Republican Party that sought to overturn Biden's election, including through the January 6 fascist coup attempt at the Capitol, will be bipartisan agreement on policies of imperialist aggression abroad.

Three nominees appeared before separate Senate committees Tuesday: Anthony Blinken, Foreign Relations; Lloyd Austin, Armed Services; and Avril Haines, Intelligence.

All of them are veterans of the criminal policies carried out by the Obama administration, from wars and regime change interventions in the Middle East and the drone assassination program to the 2014 coup in Ukraine.

The overriding issue discussed in the hearings was preparation for "great power" conflict with China. While in the course of the 2020 election campaign Trump had tried to portray Biden as soft on Beijing, the nominees made it clear that the incoming administration is determined to escalate Washington's anti-Chinese campaign to the point of armed conflict.

Blinken was the most explicit on this score, embracing the thrust of the Trump administration's policy. "I also believe that President Trump was right in taking a tougher approach to China," he told the committee. "I disagree very much with the way that he went about it in a number of areas, but the basic principle was the right one, and I think that's actually helpful to our foreign policy."

While failing to spell out where the incoming administration will be at odds with the Trump administration's China policy, Blinken embraced its anti-Chinese tropes, including the charge that Beijing had deceived the world about the coronavirus, and the claim that China is guilty of "genocide" against Uighur Muslims, a designation issued by Trump's rabidly anti-Chinese Secretary of State Mike Pompeo the very same day. This parting shot against Beijing has been endorsed by no other country.

The one area of potential conflict with the Senate panel was the Iran nuclear accord that the Obama administration, together with the world's other major powers, joined in 2015 trading a lifting of sanctions for Tehran's agreement to sharply curtail its civilian nuclear program. The Trump administration unilaterally abrogated this treaty in November 2018, imposing a "maximum pressure" sanctions regime that is tantamount to a state of war and has led to

widespread poverty, hunger and preventable deaths among the Iranian population.

While Biden had indicated his intention to rejoin the accord, Blinken made it abundantly clear that this would not happen anytime soon, if ever. Both the Senate panel's new Democratic chairman, Bob Menendez of New Jersey, and its ranking Republican member, Jim Risch of Idaho, are opposed to the treaty, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Blinken said that Iran would have to come back into full compliance with the JCPOA before any of the draconian sanctions are lifted. Tehran has increased its uranium stockpile, as well as its level of enrichment in response to US aggression and the failure of the Western European powers to effectively counter Washington's economic blockade. The Iranian government has insisted that Washington must make the first step by ending its violation of the agreement.

Also, Blinken said that the Biden administration would seek a "longer and stronger" agreement, meaning an accord that would not only restrict Iran's nuclear program permanently, but also compel Tehran to scrap its conventional missile program and submit to US hegemony in the Middle East. Iran has insisted that these issues are not up for negotiation.

"We're a long way from there," he assured the Senate committee in relation to the US rejoining the nuclear accord.

Blinken also indicated that the incoming administration will pursue a more aggressive policy toward Russia. "The challenge posed by Russia across a whole series of fronts is also one that is urgent," he said. "This is very high on the agenda for the incoming administration." He declared his support for providing the right-wing regime in Ukraine with "lethal support" and indicated that the incoming administration would continue the Trump administration's campaign to stop completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

He expressed essential agreement with the Trump administration's policy of aggression toward Venezuela, saying that the new administration would continue recognizing the right-wing US puppet Juan Guaidó as the country's head of state and would refuse any negotiations with President Nicolas Maduro.

Blinken indicated that the Biden administration has no intention of reversing the Trump administration's policies of total accommodation to Tel Aviv, including the transfer of the US Embassy to Jerusalem. He said that it would return to a policy of

nominal support for the so-called two-state solution, while assuring the senators that there was no prospect for “near-term” progress toward such a solution, which has been turned into a dead letter by relentless US-backed Israeli occupation of Palestinian land in the occupied territories.

The one issue where he expressed differences with the Trump administration was on its support for the near-genocidal Saudi-led war against Yemen and the Trump administration’s recent branding of the Houthi rebels as a “terrorist” organization. This designation will serve to block food supplies to a population confronting mass starvation.

No one on the committee was so rude as to note that it was Blinken who, as Obama’s deputy secretary of state in 2015, flew to Riyadh to cement the deal under which the Pentagon provided arms and logistical support, including refueling for Saudi bombers, paving the way to the mass murder of Yemeni civilians. Even in feigning disagreement with the Trump administration’s policies, Blinken affirmed Washington’s obligation to defend the House of Saud against Houthi “aggression”!

In his tenure in the State Department and as a member of the Democratic Party’s foreign policy establishment, Blinken was a fervent advocate for a more aggressive US military intervention in both Libya and Syria.

Summing up his subservience to the Republican right, he answered a series of litmus test questions from South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham, formerly a fervent Trump supporter.

Did he consider Iran the world’s number one “state sponsor of terrorism”? “I do,” Blinken replied. Did he believe that Israel is a racist nation? “No.” Should any withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan be “conditions-based”? “Absolutely.” And what would he tell Central Americans fleeing for their lives from violence and hunger? “I would say, ‘Do not come.’”

Graham was visibly elated. “I think you are an outstanding choice, and I intend to vote for you,” he said.

The essential line laid down by Blinken was echoed by the other nominees who testified Tuesday. Avril Haines, tapped by Biden as his director of national intelligence, told the Senate Intelligence Committee that China is Washington’s “most important strategic competitor.”

Haines, who as deputy CIA director under Obama, was one of the architects of the drone assassination program that claimed countless victims in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. She is being touted by the Biden team as “the first woman DNI.”

“China is a challenge to our security, to our prosperity, to our values across a range of issues, and I do support an aggressive stance,” Haines said. “That is the place we are now and one that is more assertive than where we had been in the Obama-Biden administration.”

On Iran, she answered a question about Biden rejoining the nuclear accord by saying, “I think, frankly, we’re a long way from that,” adding that the incoming administration will “have to look at the ballistic missile issues” and Iran’s “destabilizing activities.”

In his testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Gen. Lloyd Austin (ret.), nominated by Biden as defense secretary, used bellicose language to describe China as a “regional hegemon” whose “goal is to be a dominant world power.” He

added that “they are working across the spectrum to compete with us in a number of areas, and it will take a whole of government approach to push back on their efforts in a credible way.”

Included in this pushback, Austin said, would be an accelerated production of advanced nuclear weapons systems.

Similar to Haines, Austin’s nomination has been promoted as ground-breaking in that he would be the first black defense secretary. More significant than his skin color, however, is that he, like Trump’s first defense secretary, Gen. James “Mad Dog” Mattis, is a recently retired general, whose confirmation requires that both houses of the Congress waive an act prohibiting any ex-officer from serving in the post until seven years after leaving the military.

This act was aimed at bolstering civilian control over the military. The nomination of Austin, who succeeded Mattis as the commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM), overseeing US imperialism’s bloody wars throughout the Middle East and in Afghanistan, is another indication of the thorough-going militarization of the US state apparatus.

Since leaving the military, Austin took a position on the board of Raytheon Corp., one of the largest arms suppliers to the Pentagon. Upon confirmation as defense secretary, he would be required to quit the defense contractor’s board, for which he would receive a severance package worth \$1.7 million.

One statement by Secretary of State nominee Blinken summed up the incoming administration’s view of Washington’s global role. He told the Senate committee, “The reality is the world doesn’t organize itself. When we’re not engaged, when we don’t lead, then one of two things happen: either some other country tries to take our place, but probably not in a way that advances our interests or values. Or no one does, and then you get chaos.”

In other words, US imperialism must “organize” the world. Under conditions of its declining economic hegemony, this can only translate into a global eruption of American militarism.



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