

Blinken's Welcome by NATO Doesn't Hide Differences on Key Issues

President Biden's top diplomat sought to soothe allies battered by former President Donald J. Trump, promising coordination and consultation. But underlying problems remain.



By Steven Erlanger

March 24, 2021

BRUSSELS — Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken sought to smooth alliance feathers ruffled by the previous U.S. administration on a trip to NATO and the European Union this week, but his diplomatic calm did not completely mask deep-seated issues.

Mr. Blinken appeared to hit all the right soothing notes, talking of the American desire to “revitalize the alliance” and consult and coordinate with America’s Western allies “wherever and whenever we can.” He met with the E3 — the foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany — and those of the Visegrad Four — Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. He met with his Baltic colleagues.

He praised Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO secretary general, who has faced internal criticism for his sometimes awkward efforts to flatter former President Donald J. Trump and keep him from blowing up the alliance with bombastic threats. Mr. Blinken also offered nice words for Ursula von der Leyen, the embattled president of the European Commission, and the bloc’s foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell Fontelles.

And he scheduled meetings with his Belgian counterpart and a virtual thank-you to the staff of the three American embassies in Brussels.

President Biden himself will make a video appearance at Thursday’s European Union summit meeting, where more pleasant words about friendship and alliance are expected. It will be the first time an American president has made that effort since President Barack Obama in 2009.

Underneath the bandages and the bonhomie, however, familiar issues strain the alliance. A deep problem is Turkey, a NATO member that officials said is in discussions with Russia to buy more batteries of S400 antiaircraft missiles.



A Russian military cargo plane carrying part of a Russian missile system purchased by Turkey, at the Murter airfield in Ankara in 2019, in a photograph provided by the Turkish Defense Ministry. Turkish Defense Ministry, via Shutterstock

A further purchase of a Russian weapons system that has already incurred American sanctions has upset Washington and NATO, and the Biden administration has warned Turkey that under U.S. law it would incur further automatic sanctions should that transaction proceed. That was also a message Mr. Blinken repeated on Wednesday to his Turkish counterpart, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu.

Turkey is holding off for now, while also showing some restraint in a contentious exploration for gas in Greek waters in the Eastern Mediterranean, partly to cultivate better relations with Mr. Biden and the European Union because Turkey's economy is in such trouble.

Mr. Stoltenberg himself conceded that with Turkey, "there are differences and there are concerns," while emphasizing Ankara's importance to NATO and its southern flank.

Then there is Afghanistan, where the U.S. implementation of the troop withdrawal agreement it struck with the Taliban last year is coming due. A decision is coming soon, and “in together, adjust together and, when the time is right, leave together” remains the NATO position, even if it is becoming clearer that the original withdrawal deadline of May 1 is likely to slip by several months.

Mr. Blinken said that he had provided NATO colleagues “the president’s thinking.” But just as important, he insisted, were their views, which he had shared with the White House Tuesday night, he said.

“We will consult with our friends, early and often,” he said, describing it as “a change from the past that our allies are already seeing.”

He gave no indication of when a decision on how many troops to withdraw, and when, might be coming. But it seemed clear that Washington and NATO will want to give time, perhaps as much as six months, for a new effort at getting the Afghan government and the Taliban to reach a power-sharing government. The risk is that after May 1, the originally agreed date for American troops to leave, the Taliban will renew attacks on NATO forces.



American Special Forces in Kabul last year. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

China is also an undercurrent of strain. European allies are reluctant to be pushed into an American-led confrontation with China. Those countries, and especially large export-driven economies like Germany, are more dependent on China for trade.

But Mr. Blinken promised that “the United States won’t force our allies into an ‘us-or-them’ choice with China,” despite Beijing’s “coercive behavior,” he said, that “threatens our collective security and prosperity” and its efforts “to undercut the rules of the international system and the values we and our allies share.”

At the same time, Mr. Blinken said, Washington would seek to work with China on issues like climate change and health security, and do the same with Russia, despite its own aggressive actions, on nuclear arms control, “strategic stability” and climate.

And then there is the Nord Stream 2 natural-gas pipeline, a Russia-owned project that will take Russian gas to Germany, bypassing Ukraine and Poland. Mr. Biden has made no secret of his opposition to the pipeline and his intention to follow legal requirements to impose sanctions on any company or institution that aids in its construction.

Mr. Blinken repeated that position to Foreign Minister Heiko Maas of Germany at the start of their bilateral meeting. At the same time, he emphasized that Germany is among America’s most important allies, that the pipeline is “an irritant in an rock-solid alliance,” and that Germany has some choices to make.



Sections of pipe at the port in Sassnitz, Germany, last year destined for the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. Lena Mucha for The New York Times

On Iran, Mr. Blinken insisted that the E3, participants in the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, were aligned with Washington in demanding that Iran make the first move to restore compliance with it. Mr. Blinken said that Washington remained open to restart diplomatic talks with the Iranians on nuclear issues, but that “the ball is in their court.” Iran has rejected that stance, arguing that the United States abandoned the deal under Mr. Trump, reimposing harsh sanctions, and should remove them first.

Mr. Blinken also encouraged NATO allies to continue to spend more on defense as they have promised, saying that a more modern and adaptable NATO needs more resources. “When our allies shoulder their fair share of the burden, they will have a fair say in the decisions,” he said.

But he also had a veiled warning for NATO allies who are regressing in democratic practices, like Hungary, Poland and Turkey. Without naming them, he said, “some of our allies are moving in the wrong direction.” NATO allies must “all speak up when countries take steps that undermine democracy and human rights,” he said.

He further warned that to maintain and sustain American support, the alliance must also serve American interests.

“We can’t build a foreign policy that delivers for the American people without maintaining effective alliances,” he said. “And we can’t sustain effective alliances without showing how they deliver for the American people.”

Of course the other 29 countries in the alliance have voters, too. But this week’s visit was about restoration and revival, not open criticism.

As Mr. Stoltenberg said: “We have now a unique opportunity to start a new chapter in the trans-Atlantic relationship,” adding: “Secretary Blinken, Tony, once again welcome to NATO. You are here not just among allies, but also among friends.”