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How we can reach transatlantic agreement on Nord Stream 2

The dispute about gas imports from the east is neither new nor insoluble. The new US Secretary of State Blinken already mapped out a solution in 1987

Since his confirmation by the Senate at the end of January, Antony Blinken acts as the 71st US Secretary of State. After four long years in which Donald Trump and Mike Pompeo flitted around the world, reason and professionalism have returned to US foreign policy. But the experienced diplomat faces a historic challenge. The old world order, which the US was instrumental in establishing, partially lies in ruins. 'Build back better' will therefore be not just a domestic task, but a global one.

Because the revival of transatlantic relations – one of President Biden's key election promises – is also a core concern of German foreign policy, we should straight away tackle the most pressing issues. Nord Stream 2 would make a good start, along with US sanctions policy, because Antony Blinken is almost the perfect partner for a joint approach.

The debate over the gas pipeline has been tainting the transatlantic friendship for far too long. It led to the US Congress imposing tough sanctions on European firms and US senators threatening a German port with financial ruin. The pipeline has also opened up a deep rift in the EU, as Poland and the Baltic states oppose it vehemently. A pipeline that isn't even finished yet has caused a massive stir, while Russian gas continues to flow into Europe unabated and US oil imports from Russia have even increased in recent years.

What Blinken thinks

The transatlantic dispute about gas imports from the east is neither new nor without solution. That becomes very clear from the book *Ally vs Ally: America, Europe, and the Siberian Pipeline Crisis*, which Blinken published in 1987. Given the many parallels between the current conflict over the pipeline and the one from the Reagan years analysed in the book,

the insights of a younger Blinken could also point the way forward today – on both sides of the Atlantic.

According to Blinken, 'Washington was … forcing sovereign allied states and independent foreign companies to do what they perceived to be against their own national and business interests. The embargo was an intolerable affront to the Europeans, for, in their view, it brazenly asserted the United States' right to make trade and foreign policy for its allies – whether they liked it or not.'

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Then and now, as former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt explained in an interview for the book, '[t]he bottom line is simple: we will not let the U.S. dictate this aspect of our economic policy.' In Blinken's view, this 'reflects the understanding of America's partners that the NATO alliance they joined was meant to be a shield not a sword'. He went on, '[i]f the conception of NATO as a structure designed to assure collective security is still valid, it follows that aggressive policies of trade denial are not acceptable'.

Then as now any attempt to use economic warfare to force allies to show their allegiance is bound to fail – and ultimately will only weaken Western cohesion. Blinken is right on the money: 'Alliance policy, in short, must be the product of compromise, not coercion.' And NATO's eastern extension means that today we also need to take into account the threat perceptions of eastern European allies.

A plan with an open end

Here is how we could move forward together:

The Biden government puts sanctions against building the pipeline on ice. Germany allows its completion, but stops it from being put into operation. Americans and Europeans commence consultations on whether and to what extent energy-policy sanctions against Russia make sense. These talks would be open-ended, while covering energy-policy cooperation with Russia in its entirety.

Talking up Nord Stream 2 as a litmus test for dealing with Putin while ignoring the billions Russia receives in revenue from ongoing oil and gas exports is disingenuous. But the United States and the EU need to be clear about whether they really want an oil and gas embargo against

Russia and what political goals they want to achieve with such unprecedented sanctions. (Navalny's release? Free elections in Belarus? The return of eastern Ukraine, even of Crimea?) After all, sanctions only work when partners are in broad agreement and pursue a clear policy aim, namely a precisely defined change in behaviour by the sanctioned country.

These consultations should also consider alternative sanctions, such as a seizure of Russian oligarchs' assets and consistent and concerted action against money laundering and shell companies. Finally, the Biden government and the Europeans should also take into account that they seek cooperation with Moscow on climate protection and disarmament.

Above all, we should keep in mind Blinken's view that '[b]y promoting a more harmonious alliance, rather than one divided over an issue as fundamental as East–West trade relations, the West will be in a better position to meet the challenges posed by its adversaries'.

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