

Foreign Policy

White House Taps Pence Associate to Run Foreign Service

Critics fear Trump administration will politicize diplomatic corps with unprecedented pick.

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The US State Department in Washington, DC. (Nicholas KAMM/AFP/Getty Images)
The Trump administration has nominated an associate of Vice President Mike Pence for a top diplomatic role historically reserved for senior career diplomats, prompting fears President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson plan to further politicize American diplomacy.

Last month, Trump nominated Stephen Akard to be director general of the foreign service. Widely seen as one of the most prestigious jobs in the foreign service, and analogous to the chief of staff position of the military branches, the position was specifically designed to insulate the foreign service from political turbulence.

Historically, the position has always gone to a senior foreign service officer who has served as an ambassador and who has decades of experience in the diplomatic corps. Akard served eight years in the foreign service over a decade ago, from 1997 to 2005 — including tours in Belgium and India and as a staff aide to then-Secretary of State Colin Powell — before leaving to work on economic development for the state of Indiana under then-Governor Mike Pence.

His nomination has sparked fears among some officials that the administration is stacking the State Department with political supporters in key roles historically reserved for career officials. The move, eight current and former officials told Foreign Policy, will further politicize and potentially weaken the country's ranks of professional diplomats that are already reeling from the Trump administration's sidelining of Foggy Bottom and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's redesign program.

"It's raised a lot of concerns here," said one senior State Department official, speaking of the director general position. "The cornerstone of maintaining the foreign service ... could be given to a political pawn."

"It's clear he's a 'yes' man," another official said.

A State Department spokesman pushed back on the criticisms, saying his nomination is "an indication of how committed the Trump administration is to improving how the federal government operates and delivers on its mission."

The State Department did not respond to a request by FP for comment from Akard.

On Monday, the American Academy of Diplomacy, an organization representing retired senior U.S. diplomats, sent a letter to key lawmakers urging them to oppose Akard's

nomination, citing his lack of experience and concerns over the weakening of the U.S. professional diplomatic corps.

“While Mr. Akard is technically eligible for the position, to confirm someone who had less than a decade in the Foreign Service would be like making a former Army Captain the Chief of Staff of the Army, the equivalent of a four-star general,” said the [letter](#), sent to Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) and Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.), chair and ranking member respectively of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Akard’s appointment requires a still-pending Senate confirmation.

Ronald Neumann, president of the academy, told FP he hasn’t sent such a letter in his 10 years as head of the organization and can’t recall if it’s ever been done in the organization’s 34-year history.

Akard “has a unique background in both foreign affairs as well as a successful track record managing a large state government agency,” the State Department spokesman told FP. “If confirmed, we believe his experience will benefit the men and women of the State Department,” the spokesman added.

Akard left the foreign service in 2005 to work for the Indiana Economic Development Corporation. In January, he joined the State Department as a senior advisor, according to his LinkedIn profile.

In 1980, under the landmark Foreign Service Act, Congress mandated the presidentially appointed role be given to a current or retired foreign service officer to insulate it from political pressures during the normal transitions between administrations.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield, a retired U.S. diplomat who served as director general from 2012 to 2013, told FP that Akard’s appointment “meets the letter of the act, but it does not meet the intent.”

The director general heads human resources, runs training and promotions, advises the secretary on management and personnel, and handles difficult internal conflicts and issues with U.S. ambassadors and diplomats abroad — something officials say can’t really be done without decades of experience and stature within the department. “Only the senior-most and distinguished foreign service officers of their day have this job,” said one senior State Department official.

“He’s going to have a difficult time,” Thomas-Greenfield said. “He’s lacking the experience to serve as the secretary’s principal advisor on personnel issues ... and the support of the foreign service.”

“If people around Tillerson were looking for an outsider who met the bare minimum of the Foreign Service Act, this is the person you’re looking for,” said one retired diplomat.