



Gabbard builds image for bucking party

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The Democratic lawmaker who met with President-elect Donald Trump on Monday is used to bucking her own party.

A frequent presence on cable news, Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (Hawaii), 35, has made a name for herself by criticizing the administration and her own party on foreign policy and national security.

She quit her post as a Democratic National Committee vice chair to act as a surrogate for Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), the insurgent candidate challenging Hillary Clinton in the Democratic presidential primary.

She has blasted the Obama administration for refusing to say the words “radical Islam” and voted in favor of requiring FBI background checks for Iraqi and Syrian refugees.

She also declined to back the majority of House Democrats in co-sponsoring a gun control bill this summer, instead backing a compromise bill.

Like Trump and Sanders, she is a vocal opponent of the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal. On Sunday, she participated in a rally at the Capitol against the agreement.

With that background, it’s no surprise that she’d catch the eye of Trump and his newly appointed White House adviser, Stephen Bannon.

“He loves Tulsi Gabbard. Loves her,” a source familiar with the Trump adviser’s thinking told The Hill. “She gets the foreign policy stuff, the Islamic terrorism stuff.”

Gabbard was not one of the 169 Democrats in the House who signed a letter condemning Bannon’s appointment.

“Let me be clear, I will never allow partisanship to undermine our national security when the lives of countless people lay in the balance,” she said in a statement Monday released after the meeting with Trump.

It’s not clear how strong a possibility it is that Gabbard could join a Trump administration.

News reports suggest she could be up for anything from U.S. ambassador to the United Nations to secretary of State.

It’s just as possible that the meeting was a bit of optics for Trump that shows his willingness to meet with a broad spectrum of people. Trump has also met recently with Mitt Romney, the 2012 GOP presidential nominee who was a fierce critic during this year’s campaign.

“It does show a willingness to reach across the aisle, and on top of that, a different wing of the Democratic Party,” said Alex Ward, a defense expert at the Atlantic Council.

In her own statement about the meeting, Gabbard emphasized the need for people with different political views to talk to one another — particularly over national security issues such as the Syrian civil war.

“While the rules of political expediency would say I should have refused to meet with President-elect Trump, I never have and never will play politics with American and Syrian lives,” she said.

The Army National Guard major and Iraq veteran also said she wanted to impress on Trump the need to avoid being dragged into another war.

“I felt it important to take the opportunity to meet with the President-elect now before the drumbeats of war that neocons have been beating drag us into an escalation of the war to overthrow the Syrian government,” she said.

Gabbard has criticized the Obama administration for not being aggressive enough against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, which the U.S. has been fighting since 2014.

She also has been a staunch opponent of U.S. military action against the Syrian regime under President Bashar Assad, seeing it as a potential open-ended quagmire and a distraction from going after Islamic extremists.

In the meeting with Trump, Gabbard said she shared her “grave concerns that escalating the war in Syria by implementing a so-called no fly/safe zone would be disastrous for the Syrian people, our country, and the world.”

Trump has also voiced concern for getting involved in the Syrian civil war, saying it could lead to war with Russia and that the U.S. should focus on ISIS instead.

Outside observers said they could see a scenario where Gabbard could be a part of a Trump administration.

“Tulsi Gabbard has emerged as a somewhat prominent critic of the hawkish consensus,” said Cato Institute defense expert Benjamin Friedman.

He suggested she could be a better fit for Trump's foreign policy than figures such as John Bolton, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Bolton has also been mentioned for various posts in a Trump administration.

Former Trump campaign manager Kellyanne Conway praised Gabbard after the meeting, saying the lawmaker and Trump found they had a great deal in common during the meeting. She also praised Gabbard for bucking her own party.