Biden picks Katherine Tai for US trade representative: Reports

Jessica Smith

December 9, 2020

President-elect Joe Biden has selected Katherine Tai to serve as the next United States trade representative, Politico first reported on Wednesday. Tai, the chief trade lawyer for the House Ways and Means Committee, played a key role in getting the renegotiated North American Free Trade Agreement through Congress.

She also worked for the Office of the United States Trade Representative from 2007 to 2014, most recently focusing on enforcing agreements with China. Tai, a graduate of Yale and Harvard Law School, has also spent time teaching in China and is fluent in Mandarin. If confirmed, Tai will be the first woman of color to serve as U.S. trade representative, a Cabinet-level role.

Sen. Ron Wyden (R-Oregon), the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, called Tai an "inspired choice."

"Her record of getting wins for American workers demonstrates she knows how to champion the values that matter to U.S. families. She worked closely with me and my staff to craft the strongest ever protections for American workers in a trade agreement, and pass them into law with bipartisan support," said Wyden in a statement on Wednesday evening.

Wyden went on to say the Senate should quickly consider Tai's nomination.

"There are far too many pressing issues on trade facing America to leave the next administration short-handed," he said.

Sen. Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), who is expected to chair the Senate Finance Committee if Republicans control the Senate, did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Tai left a good impression on many lawmakers during negotiations with the Trump administration over changes to the revised NAFTA, known as the United States Mexico and Canada Agreement (USMCA). The top Democrat on the Banking Committee, Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) had publicly encouraged Biden to pick Tai, calling her "uniquely prepared" for the role.

Rep. Bill Pascrell (D-NJ), a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, also praised Tai.

"I'm confident she will advocate for trade policies guided by protecting American workers and our environment. I know the Ways and Means Committee will dearly miss Katherine's expertise, but I take solace knowing she's obligated to come back at least once each year to brief us on the Administration's trade policy agenda," said Pascrell in a statement.

In an interview before the nomination was first reported, Clete Willems — former Deputy Director of the National Economic Council under President Trump — said Tai would be a "fantastic" choice.

"She's someone who can bridge the gap between the progressives and the business minded. She's got experience in WTO [World Trade Organization], she's got experience in China and I think she can stand in the ring at a political level," said Willems.

If confirmed, Tai would take the post after a tumultuous four years of trade policy under President Trump. Trump imposed tariffs (often announced by tweet) on imported solar panels, washing machines, steel and aluminum and hundreds of billions of dollars in goods from China. The trade war with China, ultimately leading to a "Phase 1 deal," rattled markets for nearly two years.

"What President Trump has done is he's made trade a front page issue — and there are tons of issues now that need to be dealt with, and you need someone who's adept at navigating all of that," said Willems.

Biden has vowed to stay tough on China, but has said he'll work together with U.S. allies to do so. Experts expect him to take a more measured and targeted approach on trade.

"I think there will be a shift towards working more with the Europeans and Canadians and Mexicans — and coordinating an effort to deal with your real problem areas like China," said Simon Lester, a trade policy expert with the Cato Institute. "Biden is not going to move us to a zero tariff world, but he's not going to have constant talk and action on tariffs that Trump did."

The Biden transition did not respond to a request for comment.