



## What Does Super Tuesday Mean for U.S. Foreign Policy?

Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig

March 7, 2020

Emma Ashford: Hey Matt, welcome to the first of our (hopefully many!) debates. The Super Tuesday results surprised a lot of people, but the narrowing of the 2020 race also brings some things into focus when it comes to what the U.S. government's policies might look like a year from now.

Emma Ashford is a research fellow at the Cato Institute. Matthew Kroenig is a professor at Georgetown University. They debate foreign policy and the 2020 election.

Let's kick things off today with a discussion of the Democratic primary and where it's going on foreign policy. It's increasingly looking like a Joe Biden vs. Bernie Sanders fight, which means a competition between two candidates with some pretty different foreign-policy views. What's your take post-Super Tuesday?

Matthew Kroenig: Hi Emma, it is great to be doing this column with you. We've had the opportunity to debate onstage at events around town. In October, for example, I released a report arguing that now is the time for Washington to double down on, not retrench from, U.S. global leadership. You countered that the United States was not powerful enough to continue its post-1945 role and its interventions often made things worse, not better. Other than finding my recommendations impossible and misguided, I think you were a big fan of the report.

EA: Putting aside the content, I thought the copy-editing and printing of the report were great! But, more seriously, I think you and I disagree on most of the fundamentals of U.S. foreign policy. I'm a millennial, and like most of my generation, I want to see an American foreign policy that's fully engaged with the world but is less focused on military primacy and more in tune with the balance of power as it is today, rather than it was in 1991. Arguing about all of this here will really let us drill down on the big disagreements in U.S. foreign policy today.

MK: Definitely. Turning to the substantive issues, do the Democratic candidates even have foreign-policy views? You wouldn't know it from watching the debates.

EA: That's true. You really have to go read their websites, watch their speeches, or try to read the tea leaves in profiles of their foreign-policy advisors (like [this](#) one) to get a picture of what the candidates are actually thinking on foreign policy, since the debate moderators just aren't asking those questions.

But the upside is that at this point we're left with two candidates—Biden and Sanders—who have about 100 years of public life between them to analyze. So I find it a bit easier to understand the pros and cons of their views than I did for, say, Pete Buttigieg.

MK: Yes. In all seriousness, I think they are offering very different foreign-policy visions. Biden is trying to promise a return to a kind of pre-Trump style of American international engagement. While Sanders really is more preoccupied with domestic policy and does seem to show a worrying level of admiration for communist and socialist regimes abroad.

EA: I tend to think of Biden's foreign policy as "Make American Exceptionalism Great Again." And that's even if we ignore his many gaffes on foreign policy, like his [bizarre fixation on partitioning Iraq](#). The [pieces](#) that he's [published](#) on foreign policy all make the same big point: U.S. foreign policy was great once (before Donald Trump became president), and it will be again if we just embrace the United States' role as a global leader. Sanders—putting aside the issue of his praise for Cuba—seems to be more of the view that U.S. foreign policy has a mixed track record, that we should acknowledge the bad while continuing the good. It's a view I share.

MK: I think most people could agree that we should continue the good and discontinue the bad, the question is what goes in each category, and I'm afraid that Sanders would throw out the baby with the bathwater. I've heard too little praise from him about the remarkable role the United States has played in bringing about unprecedented levels of global peace, prosperity, and freedom over the past 75 years.

And I'm afraid that Biden thinks he can turn back the clock to 1995 (or 2008) and hasn't quite come to grips with how much has changed—like the return of great-power competition, especially with China; new technologies like AI; and rising nationalist and populist sentiments across the West.

EA: I think it's interesting, though, that the two of them do agree on some things, and it's mostly on the "bad" of U.S. foreign policy in recent years: excesses during the war on terror, that we should distance ourselves from bad allies like Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and the challenges posed by rising authoritarian states that U.S. foreign policy hasn't adequately dealt with. It's just that Biden thinks it can be fixed by simply returning to the status quo ante-Trump, while Bernie wants more radical change.

MK: Yes. Avoiding dumb wars in the Middle East has become as popular as motherhood and apple pie on both sides of the aisle.

EA: Well that's another place where you and I disagree. America does sometimes have to work with autocrats, but Mohammed bin Salman isn't just a butcher. His regional foreign policy has increased tensions with Iran, effectively destroyed Yemen, and helped to destabilize other regional states. It would be far better for U.S. national security to distance the United States from the Saudis and pursue a more balanced approach to the region. The Democratic candidates are pretty much agreed on that, too.

In fact, policy toward Saudi Arabia and Iran is one of the big shifts in the Democratic Party in the last few years, mostly thanks to the Saudi-ordered killing of Jamal Khashoggi and Mohammed bin Salman's truly awful record on regional foreign policy. Even Biden, who has a long history of support for Saudi Arabia, is now supportive of a much looser relationship with the kingdom. And both candidates have clearly stated that they'll rejoin the Iran nuclear deal without new preconditions.

MK: You're right (and it's unfortunate, in my view) that Middle East policy has become so highly politicized in recent years. I'd also add Israel to the list. But, do you really think the Democrats will simply return to the Iran deal if elected? Like Trump's approach or not, he has created real pressure on Tehran and given the U.S. government new leverage, and it would be foolish in my view not to exploit that for a better deal.

EA: Trump has certainly created new pressure and economic pain in Tehran. I'm not convinced we're any closer to new concessions on the nuclear issue though—or on anything else. Iran is no longer abiding by many of the deal's key requirements. If many critics' main argument was that the nuclear deal was bad because its provisions—like those on uranium enrichment thresholds—eventually expired, then all Trump has succeeded in doing by withdrawing is hastening the arrival of that reality.

I think for Democratic candidates, the problem is going to be one of timing. The deal is on life support at the moment, leaving a new administration very little time to get back in and resolve existing issues. But either way, I doubt Sanders or Biden would continue Trump's maximum pressure approach on Iran.

MK: I just don't think they could return to the exact terms of the nuclear deal. As you point out, the clock has been ticking, and some of the most important provisions are already about to expire. So, at a minimum, I would think a new president would want to renegotiate longer timelines. And there are signs that even the Europeans are coming around to a tougher approach, with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson expressing interest in a Trump deal.

EA: I'm still skeptical. I think the question for a Democratic president may end up being how to salvage something on Iran policy out of the wreckage of the Trump administration. That's unfortunate, because the deal with Iran was actually a substantive achievement of the Obama administration. In three years, Trump has taken Washington from its best relations with Tehran since 1979 to some of the highest hostility levels in the last four decades. It's not clear if a new Democratic administration could fix the mess even if they wanted to.

But what about Israel? You mentioned the growing partisan divide on it, and it's been fascinating to watch this week, just as everyone was distracted by Super Tuesday, the Democratic field almost all rejecting the idea of attending the annual AIPAC conference in Washington. Showing up would have been a no-brainer and practically obligatory for a Democratic candidate a decade ago. Now we're in a situation where the first potential Jewish president has called the Israeli prime minister a racist, and AIPAC a platform for bigotry.

MK: I think that's a tragedy. U.S. foreign policy in Asia and Europe is easy because our allies for the most part share our values and interests. Japan and Norway, for example, are both democracies, and they share our concerns about the threats posed by China and Russia. But the Middle East is tough.

There are countries we need to work with to advance important interests, but they don't share our values. Israel is the lone exception. It should be easy for Republicans and Democrats to support a country with a vibrant democracy and innovative economy that shares many of our most important priorities in the region, including countering Iran and the Islamic State. But I'm guessing you see it differently?

EA: I'm sympathetic to the arguments that the United States has a long history of protecting Israel, and even perhaps a moral obligation to do so. But I think what we've seen in the last few years is an Israeli government under Benjamin Netanyahu that has done its best to create a partisan split within the United States when it comes to Israel.

His government has also pursued an approach to the peace process that is completely uncompromising, backing Jared Kushner's absurd peace plan that allows for the annexation of much of the West Bank and includes land swaps that could disenfranchise much of Israel's Arab population. So I'm also strongly sympathetic to the arguments coming out of the Democratic Party that Israel under Netanyahu is moving away from those shared values and undermining any prospect for peace.

MK: I don't know that Netanyahu is trying to drive a wedge; I think he knows he needs American support regardless of who is in office. I see it more as Democratic candidates reacting to Trump's visible efforts to improve U.S.-Israeli relations after they soured in the Obama years. I agree that Trump's proposed peace plan is unlikely to work. But neither has any other approach we've tried over the decades. And honestly I'm surprised how much attention this issue still receives. Israel-Palestine is not in the top 10 U.S. foreign-policy priorities in my view.

EA: That's certainly true. It sucks up so much time and attention that could be devoted to other matters. What about Afghanistan and the Trump administration's new peace deal? It seems to me that there are some subtle differences between Biden and Sanders on Afghanistan, but they might not be obvious to the casual observer.

MK: Well, first on the deal itself. It seems to me like the United States had three options: 1) cut and run; 2) continue a small war indefinitely; 3) work for a political settlement. They're going for option three, with option two as the backup. It seems like a sensible approach to a hard problem. What do you see as the differences between Biden and Sanders? Perhaps they're not obvious even to slightly more studied observers.

EA: I'm pretty confident that a Sanders administration would pursue option three—as you put it—with option one as a backup. Biden would probably do the same as Trump: maintain a small counterterrorism force indefinitely, and not necessarily withdraw in the absence of a political settlement. I have to say—unless you believe the sunk cost fallacy is, well, a fallacy—Bernie's approach seems to make a lot more sense to me.

MK: America has shown that it can't win the war in Afghanistan with military force alone, but it can also avoid losing at an acceptable cost, and to me that is the better fallback.

EA: I think you have more in common with Joe Biden than you might think! And for me, it's this hedging that's the key distinction between Bernie and Biden. On many issues, Sanders has taken a strong stance that he'd probably follow through on: distance from Saudi Arabia; withdraw from Afghanistan; avoid major military interventions. But while Biden has made statements that

sound similar, if you look closely, he's also got a backup option for taking a more moderate stance.

MK: I do tend to side with Biden over Sanders on most of these issues. I'm not sure Bernie would be able to follow through on his promises, though. He might be mugged by reality when in the Oval Office. Remember, Barack Obama was going to close Guantánamo.

EA: The White House is pretty uniquely powerful on much of this stuff, though I agree with you that it's not all-powerful. Obama faced a lot of pushback, and he was far more moderate than Sanders. But a lot has changed over the last four years, and I think even the center of the Democratic Party has moved closer to where Sanders is on foreign policy. Which just makes it even more depressing that the remaining nominees are all septuagenarians whose formative foreign-policy experiences came in an era when the Soviet Union still existed.

MK: Speaking of the Soviet Union, the other place where the candidates have openly disagreed is on Sanders's past support for socialist and communist regimes. Do you think this is a legitimate criticism, or was Stephen Walt correct when he wrote on this site a few days ago that Americans need to grow up, stop moralizing, and learn that the United States will sometimes need to deal with unsavory characters?

EA: I think it's a fair criticism of Sanders. There are two parts to it, though. Walt is correct that U.S. foreign policy requires compromise with dictators. But there's also the politics of it. Bernie's insistence that he was right on these issues and no one should question him is just stupid politics. How hard is it to say, "Dictators are bad, and I probably shouldn't have said that"?

MK: Yes. I'd disagree with Walt, however, in that U.S. support for democracy is not just pie-in-the-sky idealism, it's also a tool of hard power. As I've argued at length elsewhere, it is one of the best instruments the United States has to mobilize democratic allies and partners to counter threats from revisionist, autocratic powers, like China. I hope we can take up the China issue in our next debate.

EA: True. We didn't even talk about China. But I do think on this, and on many other things, that Biden is advocating for something like what you just outlined: America leading the world and spreading democracy. It's like the unipolar moment never ended for him. While Sanders—despite being of the same generation—is a lot more circumspect about what the United States can achieve in the world, and much clearer that the goal is not to spread democracy, but to protect it here at home.

MK: The unipolar moment has ended? America shouldn't spread democracy? Clearly, we have a lot more to argue about. Can we try this again? Same time, same place, two weeks from now?

EA: Agreed. For once.