

# The American Conservative

## The Blob Is Back And It's Ready For War

*On foreign policy, Joe Biden promises that 'America is back.' What that means in practice is likely to be bad for Americans, and the world.*

December 3, 2020

Doug Bandow

Be very afraid: Joe Biden plans to set the world right. Expect a return to the past. Not so much to Barack Obama, but to Bill Clinton. Biden says America is back, which likely means as sanctimonious nanny wielding a metaphorical AK-47 to enforce its wishes. The ride will be dramatically different, and potentially much worse, than the experience over the last four years.

Of course, we can't know what the incoming president will do. Unfortunately, based on his writing, as well as that of his nominee for secretary of state, Antony Blinken, and selection for national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, Americans should expect a revival of liberal interventionism. Lots of mindless meddling disconnected from U.S. security, and some activity that makes Americans much less secure.

Biden, who voted for the Iraq invasion, announced his plans with boilerplate platitudes. His appointees, he said, reflect “the fact that America is back, ready to lead the world, not retreat from it, once again sit at the head of the table, ready to confront our adversaries and not reject our allies, ready to stand up for our values.” Other than Donald Trump, what recent president could not have made a similar claim?

Biden's spring article in *Foreign Affairs*, the usual establishment venue for candidates to establish their bona fides, was as bad as its cliched title: “Why America Must Lead Again.” He denounced “ill-considered trade wars” and advocated a return to the Iranian nuclear deal, but otherwise spent most of his time promoting failed interventions of the past.

He began by announcing his plan to “renew U.S. democracy and alliances.” Few Americans oppose the first, which has little to do with foreign policy. Internationally he also focused on democracy, but to the detriment of liberty, proposing a Summit for Democracy. Unfortunately, many democracies, such as Pakistan, Turkey, Malaysia, and India, are illiberal at best. Nor do they view the world—including the role of China, America's chief revival—the same way Washington does.

Although alliances can be a useful means to achieve common ends, Biden views them as permanent subsidies for other nations. Whatever its past success, why is NATO needed today? Why, 75 years after World War II, do populous, prosperous European nations require defense by Washington? South Korea too—it enjoys 50+ times the GDP and twice the population of North Korea.

Biden would replace the Trump administration's costly fixation on Iran with an even more dangerous focus on Russia. Yet the latter is a declining great power that could be held in check by Europe and should be aligned with the West rather than China. Biden said surprisingly little about China, which he called a "competitor" in his article but addressed more critically in the campaign, and North Korea, with which he wants to negotiate but would set conditions of uncertain realism.

Tony Blinken, set to be secretary of state, admitted that the Obama administration, in which he served as national security advisor, bungled Syria. But instead of recognizing that the U.S. should have avoided the multi-sided civil war, he believes America should have gotten more deeply involved, presumably meaning direct military intervention. Ronald Reagan tried that with disastrous results in Lebanon's civil war more than three decades ago. Moreover, Blinken was heedless of the Constitution, arguing that the president should have attacked Syria without congressional authorization.

In an article coauthored with Robert Kagan, a leading neocon who favors war with almost everyone, Blinken incongruously talked a moderate game:

Going forward, we have to be judicious in our use of force; to focus on the aftermath of war, as well as the war itself; to involve allies; to work with Congress and insist that it play its constitutional role. Americans need to know that if we use force, it has been carefully thought out — and by more than just a handful of officials. They deserve to know what our objectives are and to have reasonable confidence that we can achieve them.

However, they wrote of Syria: "Without bringing appropriate power to bear, no peace could be negotiated, much less imposed." Precisely how was America to enforce peace in that imbroglio? How would the U.S. be made safer by supporting jihadist militias that hated America? More important, why the persistent desire to get the U.S. into unnecessary wars of little concern to Americans?

Blinken also advocated intervention in the Libyan civil war, another U.S.-inspired disaster. In a 2012 *Foreign Affairs* article, Blinken even defended the Iraq debacle: "For more than three decades, Iraq had known nothing but dictatorship, war, sanctions, and sectarian violence. In just three years, its progress toward a more normal political existence has been remarkable." Not exactly. Two years later the Islamic State took over much of Iraq and briefly threatened Baghdad.

So what will be the Biden administration's standard for going to war? When should Washington bomb and kill other people? Why is Blinken so determined to drag Americans into *every* foolish and unnecessary war?

Blinken also reflexively embraced the idea of alliances, apparently with anyone who asks for one. He neither considers today's changed circumstances nor asks if Washington's friends could defend themselves. Why is *every* American friend, even after decades of development, seemingly dissolute and helpless without ever-increasing U.S. aid?

Sullivan shares an expansive view of Americans' responsibilities around the world. Nevertheless, he seems more open to less militarized policies, though he evidences no willingness to shift defense responsibilities onto others. For instance, he coauthored thoughtful articles on how to rely more on diplomacy in the Middle East and chart a course between Cold War and grand bargain with China. However, the latter would still threaten military confrontation over primarily allied interests.

In a book review published almost two years ago in *Foreign Affairs*, Sullivan also admitted that mistakes had previously been made, though he left the miscreants unnamed. He defended the Blob from attack, even claiming that it gave due consideration to heterodox ideas, such as foreign policy restraint. Yet one need merely scan the publications and webinars of mainstream think tanks to note the almost complete absence of alternative voices and ideas. I doubt that the Obama White House, in which Sullivan also served as national security advisor, spent much time considering such proposals as withdrawing troops from Europe and South Korea, ending financial assistance to Israel, and withdrawing objections to South Korea and Japan developing nuclear weapons to deter North Korea and China.

Indeed, he went so far as to claim that "Most in the foreign policy community would oppose another conflict of choice in the Middle East." Really? That is an important concession for one of the prime cheerleaders of the Libya debacle. However, who among charter Blob members does not still believe the U.S. should have bombed Syria over chemical weapons, sought to bring order to Libya, kept all options "on the table" against Iran, defended Israel without question, protected the Saudi royal family come what may, treated Ukraine and Georgia as if they were allies, and more? Sullivan's preferred policies make a general war more possible, whether he intends it or not, and for interests which are not worth fighting over.

Notably, he fails to consider how changing circumstances should change foreign policy. Might withdrawing U.S. forces from Asia and Europe after World War II have ended badly, he asked? Sure, but the Cold War has been over for more than 30 years. WWII has been over for 75 years. Whatever the justification before, Washington need not maintain a perpetual defense dole for prosperous and populous friends that lasts forever.

Sullivan also mythologizes a mystical public marching for war. Explaining Obama's 2014 return to Iraq: "after the beheading of two American journalists, the public demanded action, swift and decisive, not to contain ISIS but to defeat it." Actually, what is remarkable is how little the Islamic State's rise, terrible though it was in a human sense, affected the U.S. Two journalists who traveled to Syria were killed, full stop. It was members of the Blob who insisted on action. There were no public rallies on behalf of war, mass letter-writing campaigns demanding action, or coordinated Haka-performing flash mobs promoting intervention. Rather, Sullivan's friends and associates told him what he probably believed all along: *America must lead!*

Of greatest concern, Sullivan imagines a growing coalition of the Blob, which wants to intervene militarily everywhere, with the Left, which wants to intervene in human affairs of every kind. He termed it "a kind of convergence of the left and the center," which truly is a prescription for endless wars.

Alas, Republicans seem unlikely to offer a serious alternative other than pushing for even more intense and frequent intervention, confrontation, and war. Outgoing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, an arrogant bungler who pushed confrontation at every turn while achieving little of substance, said the Biden team “lived in a bit of a fantasy world,” exactly what many said of his counterproductive policies toward Iran, Saudi Arabia, and many other nations. Sen. Marco Rubio, one of the reflexive GOP hawks who has never worn a uniform, complained that Biden’s nominees “will be polite & orderly caretakers of America’s decline.” Of course, thoughtless aggression of the sort advocated by Rubio has done far more to sap U.S. power and reputation.

President Donald Trump was a huge disappointment when it came to foreign policy. His rhetoric sometimes was good, but he never put his words into action. Not in Europe, South Korea, Afghanistan, Syria, or Iraq. Instead, those he appointed consistently undermined, ignored, and overrode his views. The egregious Jim Jeffrey lied to the president and betrayed the public’s trust, putting his views before the nation’s interest. In other cases the president was ostentatiously awful, failing to resist the revival of the Cold War with Moscow and turning Iran policy over to Saudi Arabia’s Mohammed bin Salman and Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu, who naturally put their nations before America.

Unfortunately, Joe Biden likely will do worse, accepting the braindead status quo without even an occasional rhetorical dissent from interventionist orthodoxy. Will we at least escape another war of choice, as Sullivan suggested? To believe so would reflect the triumph of hope over experience. But that is about the only hope we have.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. He is a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan and author of several books, including Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.*