



## As Joe Biden Takes Over, Washington Is in Desperate Need of a Little Foreign Policy Humility

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January 20, 2021

Jake Sullivan, President Joe Biden's newly appointed National Security Adviser, began issuing orders to Russia two days before his installation. Sullivan urged Moscow to release Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader arrested on his return to Russia on Sunday. Insisted Sullivan: "The Kremlin's attacks on Mr. Navalny are not just a violation of human rights, but an affront to the Russian people who want their voices heard."

Sullivan is right. Russian President Vladimir Putin is a dictator determined to use any means fair or foul to stay in power. The latter *should* release Navalny – as well as dismantle the system of repression, release other political prisoners, hold free elections, allow anyone to run against him, and step aside if he loses.

Does anyone in Washington expect Putin do so? Does anyone even expect the Russian leader to follow Sullivan's more limited instruction to free Navalny? Does *Sullivan* expect Putin to do so?

Surely the answer is no. Which actually is good. It would be dangerous to have a top adviser to the president who lived in a fantasy world.

Yet most U.S. policymakers appear to spend most of their time mistaking dreams for reality. They routinely instruct the world how to behave. Almost always the world simply ignores America's arrogant pretensions and proceeds on its way. That is especially the case for well-armed great powers such as Russia which view retention of power as a vital, even existential interest.

Rather than admit his dismal record, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was active almost to the last-minute attempting to hamstring the incoming administration. One of America's least effective secretaries of state, he was playing a role akin to that of the Biblical Samson, seeking to bring down the entire temple on those who refused to do his will. Sullivan will have to repair the enormous damage done.

Moreover, the Trump administration left a long unfinished foreign policy agenda. For instance, Russia was supposed to have returned Crimea and ended support for ethnic-Russian insurgents against the Ukrainian government. Germany was supposed to have abandoned the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline. Europe was supposed to have supported Washington's technology assault

against China. Turkey was supposed to have ended its mass violation of human rights and halted aggressive tactics in the eastern Mediterranean, especially against Cyprus and Greece.

Iran was supposed to have surrendered its independent foreign policy and accepted U.S.-Israeli-Saudi domination of the Persian Gulf. Syria's Bashar al-Assad was supposed to have left office, leaving a thriving democracy behind. Russia and Iran were supposed to be out of Syria. Turkey was supposed to stop victimizing the Syrian Kurds. Iraq was supposed to have rid itself of Iranian influence and eradicated the Islamic State. Lebanon was supposed to have found good governance. Yemen's Houthis were supposed to have surrendered to Saudi/Emirati invaders.

Cuba was supposed to have released political prisoners, held elections, and accepted its place within America's sphere of influence. Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro was supposed to have yielded power. Russia and China were supposed to end aid to Maduro's government. Iran was supposed to stop supplying Venezuela with fuel in violation of American sanctions.

North Korea was supposed to abandon its nuclear weapons and other WMD programs, cease building missiles, and stop violating human rights. South Korea was supposed to give Washington lots more money in host nation support. Seoul and Tokyo were supposed to kiss and make up regarding their disputes going back to World War II. The Philippines was supposed to allow America to defend it without complaint.

China was supposed to live up to a long list of US expectations: respect human rights, abandon abusive trade and other commercial practices, redo its technology policy, halt aggressive naval tactics, abandon contested territorial claims, reduce military buildup, cut back Belt and Road Initiative projects, stop cyberattacks, and otherwise behave according to American dictates.

Libya was supposed to end its civil war. The outside parties – Saudi Arabia, Italy, the United Arab Emirates, France, Turkey, Russia, and Egypt – were supposed to exit Libya's fight. Egypt was supposed to improve human rights and stop detaining American citizens. Nigeria was supposed to end Boko Haram's depredations against Christians and others. Zimbabwe was supposed to abandon decades of tyranny. A series of weak African states were supposed to improve their performance against Islamist extremists, such as al-Shabaab in Somalia. The Afghan government was supposed to develop the ability to stand on its own amid negotiations with the Taliban.

Oh well, you can't win them all!

To be fair, not every aspect of President Donald Trump's agenda went awry. For example, what has become Greater Israel further strengthened its position atop an impoverished and subservient Palestinian population and Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman demonstrated impunity even when committing murder and aggression. Although dubious objectives of insubstantial value to America, these were noteworthy Trump administration accomplishments.

Some Arab states recognized Israel, a gain mostly for the latter. Summitry with North Korea's Kim Jong-un was an incomplete advance. Europe and Japan did a bit more for their own defense, though they had started doing so before Trump took office. There aren't many other successes, alas.

The Trump administration was especially, perhaps uniquely, cynical, incompetent, and arrogant, but its agenda was not that dissimilar from those of the Obama and Bush administrations before.

Nor, frankly, is there likely to be a lot of difference with the incoming Biden administration. There will be a different approach toward Iran, less reliance on sanctions as the panacea to every problem, a greater emphasis on human rights, and unctuous coddling of the Europeans. However, in the main Washington, absent a dramatic conversion by Biden, will continue to attempt to micro-manage the globe. Jesus taught, "not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it." Similarly, nothing will happen on Earth without Washington knowing it – and wanting to change it.

President Biden would do well to reflect on the fact that the US, the world's most powerful nation, demands much of everyone around the globe. American policymakers insist that they are entitled to decide for the entire world political arrangements, civil liberties, economic policies, foreign initiatives, territorial lines, international relations, treaty terms, development projects, and much more. Not a sparrow can fall anywhere without Washington being involved.

Yet in the vast majority of cases the US fails to achieve its objectives. Because other peoples act precisely as Americans would if presented with the same demands by another power. Yet routine failure does not much matter to the US. Most Americans are cheerfully unaware that American policy is thwarted every day in every way. No Americans will suffer if Navalny remains in custody. If Iranians continue to aid the Assad regime which continues to hang onto power. If Boko Haram continues to commit murder and mayhem. If North Korea continues to upgrade its missiles and nukes. And even if China continues to compete with us.

Most foreign policies are elite preferences rather than popular necessities. That doesn't mean none are worth pursuing. But policymakers should exhibit much greater humility and prudence in doing so. They should approach the world as it is and not how they wish it would be. They should concentrate on practical and achievable goals. And they should emphasize the interests of their fellow citizens who they are supposed to represent, rather than their personal whims, no matter how attractive in theory.

Russia should release Alexei Navalny from detention. But Jake Sullivan saying so won't make it so. Indeed, issuing an imperious public demand may ensure that Moscow refuses.

American foreign policy is long overdue for a major overhaul. Despite Trump's crude and intemperate nature, he made few substantive changes. The quintessential company man, Joe Biden, could become the first president to truly understand the benefit of doing less abroad.

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