

On foreign policy, Bernie Sanders shines

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Bernie Sanders is a strident ideologue with immovable convictions that defy conventional Democratic thinking and haven't changed in more than half a century. When it comes to foreign policy, however, he may be exactly what we need.

I am no fan of Mr. Sanders' domestic policy agenda, which shows an undue faith in the wisdom and competence of the federal government to reshape our economic lives. But his approach to international affairs indicates a humility and restraint that has long been absent from the halls of power.

Foreign policy is probably the most important consideration in choosing a president because it is the realm in which he or she exercises the greatest control. Though Mr. Sanders may champion "Medicare for All" and punitive wealth taxes, he can't bring them about without persuading Congress — which is unlikely. If he decides to withdraw from Afghanistan or reenter the Iran nuclear deal, by contrast, no one will stop him.

Nevertheless, the Democratic contenders have spent little time discussing America's proper role in the world, and the people they're appealing to don't care. A September FiveThirtyEight/Ipsos poll of Democratic voters asked them to name the issues they regard as most important, and foreign policy came in 15th on the list.

Given Donald Trump's alienation of our traditional allies, embrace of our traditional foes and general disdain for our traditional formulas, a return to the old ways may sound sensible. But his approach has been erratic and irresponsible. And even Barack Obama showed the dangers of being too cautious in breaking with the past.

He did reject some bad ideas, such as sending lethal military aid to Ukraine and establishing a no-fly zone in Syria. But he continued the war in Afghanistan and greatly expanded the use of drone strikes in places like Somalia and Yemen, without congressional authorization.

Mr. Obama intervened in Libya, with consequences that he later admitted were "a mess." Though Mr. Obama mocked the "Washington playbook," he never threw it out. Most of the Democratic candidates sound as though they would generally follow his centrist example.

Mr. Sanders, it's safe to predict, would not. As a House member, he had the insight and nerve to vote against the Iraq War — even as Democratic Sens. Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, John Kerry and John Edwards were voting for it.

He is hardly alone in favoring the revival of the nuclear deal with Iran, but other candidates are less committed than he is. Mr. Biden, Elizabeth Warren and Pete Buttigieg would re-enter only on if Iran first resumes compliance with its obligations.

Not Mr. Sanders. He told the Council on Foreign Relations, "I would re-enter the agreement on day one of my presidency." Others support pulling combat troops out of Afghanistan but leaving some forces in place. Mr. Sanders says he would withdraw, period.

Others agree with Mr. Trump on using economic sanctions to bring down Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. Mr. Sanders opposes sanctions and says, "My administration would not be in the business of regime change."

I asked several restraint-oriented international relations scholars which top-tier candidate would be most likely to reverse our longstanding impulse to intervene with abandon. All had the same answer.

"Bernie is the only restrainer in the lot," said University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer. "The key question is whether he could stand up to the Blob, which would go to enormous lengths to undermine his efforts to pursue a less militaristic foreign policy." The Blob refers to the influential network of think tanks, advocates and intellectuals that has dominated foreign policy for decades.

"Sanders would be less likely to be coopted by Blobby advisers into taking military action," John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, told me.

Ms. Warren and Mr. Sanders generally sound alike, said Richard Hanania, a research fellow at Columbia's Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies: "The difference is that Warren has consistently changed who she's been across her political career, while Sanders has been consistent for decades."

The sort of relentless obstinacy that Mr. Sanders exhibits can be an impediment to reasonable solutions. But when a crisis erupts and alarmists demand U.S. action to avert some imagined peril, it takes great strength to resist. Mr. Sanders has no feeble convictions. He is not likely to fold for fear of being called weak, naive or isolationist. Like Honey Badger, Bernie don't care.

Mr. Obama and Mr. Trump both ran promising to end the forever war and stop treating every international problem as something we can and should fix. Mr. Sanders might actually deliver.