

## Can Bernie Make Biden A Bro On Foreign Policy?

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If there is one indisputable fact in this crazy coronavirus world we live in, it is this: Joe Biden is the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee. Which means that Americans will soon be asking a fundamental question: what would a Biden foreign policy look like?

The answer may very well be determined by the man whom Biden vanquished in the primary: Senator Bernie Sanders. The power of the progressive movement and the increasing popularity of Sanders' foreign policy vision—that of an America that refrains from searching the world for monsters to destroy and prizes diplomatic solutions—will force the former vice president out of his comfort zone.

Progressive organizations were active right out of the gate. They sent a letter to the Biden campaign on Monday declaring the need to cut a bloated Pentagon by \$200 billion, deemphasize the use of sanctions in Washington's foreign policy toolkit, and repeal a 19-year-old authorization that has provided the president with virtually open-ended war powers.

We like to think of Joe Biden as an establishmentarian, which, as it relates to U.S. foreign policy, means viewing America as a benevolent hegemon whose universal values are given equal weight in the policymaking process with other harder interests. Biden's article in the March/April edition of *Foreign Affairs* is a microcosm of this bipartisan Washington consensus. There, authoritarians must be challenged, international rules and norms must be followed, and Washington must maintain prominence over China to prevent the world from reverting to a state of bipolarity.

Biden's "Summit for Democracy to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world" sounds like a more tepid version of George W. Bush's 2005 Freedom Agenda. It's the kind of lofty Beltway proposal that could just as easily have been authored by Marco Rubio, Paul Wolfowitz, or Thomas Friedman at any given time in post-9/11 history.

Bernie Sanders, of course, likes democracy as much as the next guy. He was anything but soft on the Chinese and the Russians during the campaign. He warned Russian President Vladimir Putin

to stay out of American elections and criticized Biden for seeming to dismiss Beijing as an economic threat.

Yet Sanders, unlike most modern presidential candidates, isn't captivated by the use of military force as a means of solving problems. Nor is he particularly sympathetic to the argument that the United States needs a foreign military presence in places like Afghanistan and Syria to defend against terrorism. The fault lines between Biden and Sanders are deep. As John Glaser of the Cato Institute told me, "the primary distinction between Sanders and Biden on foreign policy is that the former vowed to be a change agent and the latter vows to return to tradition (or, more precisely, maintain it)." Reconciling those two general visions could be as fruitless as trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

The extent to which Sanders will impact Biden's foreign policy platform is an open question. While Sanders advisers have reportedly been invited to the Biden camp to discuss these very issues, the former vice president is the very definition of a Washington insider. He is confident in his views, has a curious take on history (you can see this in his justifications of his 2002 Iraq war vote), and has a preconceived interpretation of U.S. power and responsibility. If Biden's foreign policy platform is to contain any reform, it will likely come on the margins.

For many in Bernie's camp, Biden needs to go bigger and bolder. The Quincy Institute's Stephen Wertheim, who informally advised Sanders' presidential campaign, said the last thing the country can afford is a business-as-usual mentality.

"I would hope the Biden campaign understands that few Americans, and even fewer progressives, are looking for a restoration of U.S. foreign policy to the way it was before Trump, or to any point in the past two decades," Wertheim told me over email. "Biden's point of departure should be not restoration but transformation: stop creating unnecessary military antagonists abroad and start investing in real threats to the American people and the world, like climate change and pandemic disease."

To Biden's credit, there have been changes. It wasn't long ago that he served in an administration that sold over \$115 billion in arms to Saudi Arabia—the most under any presidency in history—and provided extensive political cover for Riyadh at the United Nations whenever allegations of war crimes in Yemen came up. But Biden's position on the Saudis has become noticeably more adversarial since then.

In May, Biden's spokesman told the Washington Post that the former VP believed "it is past time to end U.S. support for the war in Yemen and cancel the blank check the Trump administration has given Saudi Arabia for its conduct of that war."

Biden went a few steps further in a debate last November, revealing that Riyadh's premeditated murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi had changed his entire perspective on the Kingdom. "I would make it very clear we were not going to in fact sell more weapons to them," Biden told the moderators. "We were going to in fact make them pay the price, and make them in fact the pariah that they are."

It's plausible that Sanders, with his leadership on the issue and his role in passing the first war powers resolution against U.S. participation in that war, may have been a factor in bringing Biden to that position.

The defense budget may also be ripe for a review in the Biden camp. It's no mystery what Sanders wants to do. The senator has long held—vocally—that the Pentagon is a massively bloated organization that receives far more taxpayer dollars than it deserves. “In Bernie’s view,” Sanders’ campaign told *Military Times* in a 2019 questionnaire, “we should not be spending more on the military than the next ten nations combined.... The Pentagon is the only federal agency that cannot pass an independent audit, virtually every major defense contractor has been found guilty of fraud, and the Defense Department tried to bury a report highlighting \$125 billion in bureaucratic waste....”

Biden, in the same questionnaire, was more circumspect, choosing to focus less on the Pentagon’s top-line number and more on where it spends its money. The former vice president has a point: it’s absurd that lawmakers and defense officials continue to devote boatloads of cash to legacy systems and support a pace of operations that severely degrades the military’s overall readiness. But Sanders has a point too—the Pentagon is perhaps the only department in the federal government that can count on a funding boost every fiscal year, regardless of its past performance or whether other agencies (like the State Department) are scrounging for resources.

At a time when the COVID-19 crisis is forcing U.S. officials to reassess the nation’s priorities, Bernie’s years-long opposition to padding the defense budget with additional resources is suddenly much more politically feasible. It should surprise no one if Biden eventually adopts this position as his own.

In the long run, the 2020 presidential election won’t be won or lost on anyone’s foreign policy platform. COVID-19 has not only dominated the news cycle, it’s transformed the entire campaign into a referendum on Trump’s response to the crisis.

But we would be remiss if we discarded foreign policy altogether. The next president of the United States will also be the next commander-in-chief, responsible for determining where the U.S. deploys troops, which diplomatic relationships should be reinforced or reformed, which agencies should be prioritized, and how Washington operates in a world where great power politics has returned in force.

Bernie Sanders won’t be battling Donald Trump this November. But he will have an effect on how Biden addresses all of these issues.