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The Foreign Policy of US Democrats: An Assessment Ahead of the Iowa Caucuses

by Prof. Eytan Gilboa

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Foreign policy issues only rarely play a major role in American presidential elections, and when they do, it is usually at times of acute international crisis or warfare. Such matters had received little attention in the 2020 debates among the Democratic presidential hopefuls—until the targeting killing of Qassem Soleimani and the reentry into the news cycle of Trump’s peace plan. The leading Democratic candidates have since made statements about the role of the US in the world, deployment and use of force, the nuclear deal with Iran, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. There are differences among the candidates, but they all promise to radically change American foreign policy.

It is now primary season for the Democrats in the run-up to the US presidential election, and the party’s focus has predictably been on domestic rather than foreign affairs. That pattern is now changing in the wake of the targeting killing by the US of Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani and Trump’s Israeli-Palestinian “Deal of the Century”. In the last television debate to take place before the Iowa caucuses scheduled for February 3, the six remaining candidates debated major foreign policy issues. (A few other candidates, such as former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, might join the Democratic primaries later on.)

No coherent foreign policy platform

None of the candidates has offered a detailed or coherent foreign policy platform. The recent debate did, however, reveal a few common elements, as did interviews the candidates have given and public statements they have made. Despite their differences, they largely agree about what the US should

do after the election: the opposite of everything President Trump has been attempting to accomplish.

At the moment, only four of the six candidates have a real shot at winning the Democratic nomination: President Barack Obama's VP Joe Biden, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, and Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana. The following analysis is based on statements made by these candidates.

The four can be divided into two ideological camps. Biden and Buttigieg are “moderate restorationists,” meaning they want to restore the US role in foreign affairs to what it was before Trump. Sanders and Warren are “radical renovators,” meaning they believe the present governmental system is totally broken and must be replaced with a “progressive” system. In foreign affairs, that would mean “fully renovat[ing] the American role in the world.” The candidates’ foreign policy positions are derived from these ideologies.

General orientation

Foreign policy encompasses such issues as international trade, climate change, and immigration, but we will focus here on strategic issues that are primarily relevant to the Middle East and Israel.

All four candidates severely criticize Trump for his handling of foreign affairs—both his global outlook and his specific decisions on issues and regions. They all believe the US must repair its relationships with its allies, especially the European countries; restore the role of diplomacy; work with international organizations, primarily the UN and its agencies; reduce spending for the military; limit presidential authority to use force; reduce or completely withdraw US forces from the Middle East; and restore the nuclear deal with Iran.

“The American people are sick and tired of endless wars, which have cost us trillions of dollars,” Sanders said. “Our job is to rebuild the United Nations, rebuild the State Department, make sure that we have the capability of bringing the world together to resolve international conflict diplomatically, and stop the endless wars that we have experienced.” Warren used similar language and urged the need to stop “endless wars.” Biden and Buttigieg used more moderate and realistic language to make essentially the same point.

None of them, however, has explained how they intend to accomplish these goals, especially when dealing with hostile states like Iran and North Korea and aggressive powers like Russia and China. “Bringing the world together” is a naïve idea that belongs to the immediate post-WWII era, and the UN and many of its agencies are highly politicized, corrupt, and ineffective.

Deployment and the use of force

While all the candidates call for the withdrawal of US forces from the Middle East, they differ on scope, timing, and location. All support the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. Warren wants to bring back all US troops from the Middle East immediately because “we should stop asking our military to solve problems that cannot be solved militarily... We need to use our economic tools. We need to use our diplomatic tools.”

Biden and Buttigieg offer a more nuanced view. Biden initially said Americans must leave the entire region but later distinguished between combat troops and special forces and between states and terrorists. He said diplomacy and negotiations should be used to resolve interstate conflicts, but added, “There’s no way you negotiate...with terrorists. You have to be able to form coalitions, to be able to defeat them or contain them.” He criticized Trump for pulling forces out of the Syrian-Turkish border area and said he would leave special forces in the region to fight ISIS and other terrorist organizations as well as small naval forces to patrol the Gulf. Buttigieg supports the deployment of forces but “without having an endless commitment of ground troops.”

All the Democratic candidates argue that Trump should have consulted with Congress before ordering the targeted killing of Soleimani. Biden said the Obama administration had Congressional authorization to fight al-Qaeda and ISIS, but Trump didn’t when he targeted Soleimani. Sanders proudly pointed to a bipartisan resolution he initiated to prohibit US support for Saudi military operations in Yemen. Warren said the president can use force without congressional approval if there is an imminent threat, “but we need an authorization for the use of military force before we take this nation into combat. That is what the Constitution provides and that’s what as Commander in Chief I will do.”

These statements are all confusing, anachronistic, and ineffective.

Iran

All the candidates agree that Iran shouldn’t be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons and believe the nuclear deal negotiated by Obama was a good one. Biden claims the deal “was working and being held tightly.” He has criticized Trump’s withdrawal from the deal and renewal of sanctions, and says that after the election the US should restore the alliance that negotiated the deal and “insist that Iran go back into the agreement, which I believe with the pressure applied as we put on before we can get done.” Sanders echoes the same ideas. “I would reenter the agreement on day one of my presidency and then work with the P5+1 and Iran to build upon it with additional measures to further

block any path to a nuclear weapon, restrain Iran's offensive actions in the region and forge a new strategic balance in the Middle East."

Buttigieg repeats the same stance: "Ensuring that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons will of course be a priority because it's such an important part of keeping America safe." He also believes the only way to achieve this goal is by rebuilding an international alliance.

These statements ignore the weaknesses of Obama's deal, as well as Iran's continuing experimentation with long-range missiles and aggressive interventions in multiple Middle Eastern countries. It is no wonder that the extreme Islamic regime in Tehran is yearning for a Democratic win in the 2020 election.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict

All the candidates strongly criticize Israeli policy and Trump's actions, including the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem, the cutting of aid to the Palestinian Authority, and his recently revealed peace plan. On this plan, Biden said: "A peace plan requires two sides to come together. This is a political stunt that could spark unilateral moves to annex territory and set back peace even more." Sanders stated that any agreement "must end the Israeli occupation and enable Palestinian self-determination in an independent state of their own alongside a secure Israel. Trump's so-called 'peace deal' doesn't come close and will only perpetuate the conflict. It is unacceptable."

Warren said, "Trump's 'peace plan' is a rubber stamp for annexation and offers no chance for a real Palestinian state. Releasing a plan without negotiating with Palestinians isn't diplomacy, it's a sham." She warned, "I will oppose unilateral annexation in any form—and reverse any policy that supports it." Buttigieg "censured the plan as undermining a workable solution to the conflict."

These harsh statements stress two points: the Palestinians weren't involved, and the plan gives Netanyahu a green light to annex Israeli settlements in the West bank. Both points are questionable. The Palestinians weren't involved because they refused all invitations to participate, and it isn't at all clear that the Trump administration has given Netanyahu a green light to annex territories. It said a committee will be established to examine all aspects of the annexation issue.

Sanders acknowledges that the Palestinians and the Israelis themselves will have to make the choices necessary for a final agreement, but promises that his administration would bring "real pressure" to bear on both sides. By "both sides," of course, he means Israel alone, not the Palestinians. Obama was the

most pro-Palestinian president in American history and applied enormous one-sided pressure on Israel to make concessions. Trump has been one of the most pro-Israeli presidents in American history and has applied enormous pressure on the Palestinians. In both cases, the Palestinians refused to move one inch from their fundamental rejectionist policy.

Sanders, Warren, and Buttigieg all say they would use American aid to Israel to pressure Jerusalem into changing its policies. They specifically cite annexation of West Bank territory as a cause to reduce aid or suspend it entirely. Sanders acknowledges that “Israelis absolutely have the right to live in peace, independence and security,” but asserts that under Netanyahu, Israel has an “an extreme right-wing government” that he is willing to lean on by wielding American military aid as leverage. Warren says military aid to Israel could be made conditional on the cessation of settlement expansion in the West Bank, a position also adopted by Buttigieg.

Biden alone opposes all these ideas and calls them “absolutely outrageous.” Leveraging aid to stop settlements would, he said, be a “gigantic mistake.” The idea is both hypocritical and counterproductive. It is hypocritical because the Democrats severely criticized Trump for his cutting of aid to the Palestinians and UNRWA, and it is counterproductive because military aid to Israel is more an investment than assistance as the US benefits from it as much as Israel does.

Conclusion

If Biden or Buttigieg wins the Democratic nomination, they are likely to adopt a foreign policy similar to that of Obama. If Sanders or Warren wins, they will adopt a radical approach involving major changes to various areas of foreign affairs. A hybrid ticket in which the presidential and VP nominees are divided between “moderate restorationists” and “radical renovators” could expose the president, should the Democrats ultimately win the election, to substantial influence from the other ideological camp.

No matter who the nominee turns out to be, a Democratic win in the general election could radically change US policy toward Israel and the Middle East. The new Israeli government should prepare well for this possible outcome.

Prof. Eytan Gilboa is an expert on American politics and foreign policy and a senior research associate at the BESA Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University.