Dialogues on American Foreign Policy and World Affairs: A Conversation with Jake Sullivan

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TRANSCRIPT

Please note: This transcript is based off a recording and mistranslations may appear in text. A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/1657-dialogues-on-american-foreign-policy-and-world-affairs-a-conversation-with-jake-sullivan32019
KEN WEINSTEIN: Well, good afternoon, and welcome to the Walter and Betsy Stern Conference Center here at Hudson Institute. I'm Ken Weinstein, president and CEO of Hudson Institute, and I'd like to welcome our audience here on Pennsylvania Avenue and also our C-SPAN viewing audience to the latest installment in our Dialogues on American Foreign Policy and World Affairs. Now, before we get underway, I just want to note our solidarity with our good friends and allies in New Zealand, especially the victims and their families, on this day after the horrific mosque attacks in Christchurch. That being said, let's get our program under way. The Dialogues on American Foreign Policy and World Affairs are hosted by the Ravenel B. Curry III distinguished fellow in strategy and statesmanship at Hudson Institute, Walter Russell Mead. Walter is the dean of observers of U.S. foreign policy and perhaps the most widely-read - I think, actually, the most widely-read, not even a perhaps, I'll remove that perhaps - the most widely-read columnist on world affairs in the United States through his Global View column, which appears Tuesdays in The Wall Street Journal. And Walter is in conversation today with Jake Sullivan.

Jake Sullivan is, of course, an important and widely respected voice in the American foreign policy debate and one whose insights are being widely sought out as the Democratic Party's 2020 primary process - presidential primary process gets underway in earnest. He is a native of Minneapolis, a graduate of Yale University and a Rhodes scholar. And he - I guess, he first came to Washington as an aide to Senator Amy Klobuchar, whom he knew since his days in high school, as I just learned. He then went on to serve as an adviser to then-Senator Hillary Clinton in 2008. When Senator Clinton became Secretary of State Clinton, Jake joined the State Department as deputy chief of staff and director of policy planning. When Secretary Clinton stepped down in 2013, he moved to the White House and became national security adviser to Vice President Joe Biden. He has seen foreign policy in action, up close and with - both with key world leaders and, obviously, with key American officials. He was chief foreign policy adviser to Secretary Clinton during her 2016 presidential campaign. He is currently the Montgomery fellow at Dartmouth College and also a non-resident fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Without any further ado, let me turn it over to Walter so our program can get underway. Thank you very much.

WALTER RUSSELL MEAD: Great.

(APPLAUSE)

MEAD: Thanks, Ken, for introducing us. And thanks, Jake, so much for being here, and welcome to Hudson.

JAKE SULLIVAN: Thank you.

MEAD: It really is a great privilege. Jake is someone I've been lucky enough to know for some time, and I do think he's one of the most interesting observers of American foreign policy. So we're going to have some interesting conversation, I think, today. Jake, from where you sit, what do you think are the most interesting debates in the Democratic Party today over foreign policy?

SULLIVAN: Well, you know, I'll start by saying that, actually, the election of Donald Trump has reduced the degree to which there's been really dynamic debate within the Democratic Party because there's been a kind of back-to-basics element to this. What used to be sort of simple
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bromides - we believe in alliances, we believe in values, you know, we don't like nuclear war - have now become kind of the standard fare of what people say when they're talking about foreign policy. And so, at a moment when some of the great questions in international affairs are newly up for debate, the political conversation in the Democratic Party, I would say, is overly focused on Trump and not nearly focused enough on grappling with those questions. But with that kind of very large asterisk or caveat in mind, I do think we are starting to see a real conversation around question - a set of questions. So, first, yes, we believe in alliances, but it's also time to look forward and not just backward.

So what, actually, should our alliances be aimed at in terms of their fundamental objectives in the years ahead? The Democratic candidates will end up talking about that. Second - and maybe most fundamentally of all - where do we go on China? Because I would say Democrats, like Republicans, have sort of centered around this notion that we've gotten China policy wrong for a long time and that, as a result, we've let some of our strength in that dynamic slip. And, therefore, we now need to make major adjustments. What are those adjustments? That's going to be a big topic of conversation within the Democratic Party. And then, finally, the issue of trade. TPP was a major question in 2016. I think you'll see a robust debate among candidates in 2020. This is not just going to be a race to reject international trade, but there'll be a vigorous debate about what the terms are, what the rules should be, and what the sequence should be for how we take on trade issues. It's easy enough for people to go after Trump on the trade war. It'll be more interesting to watch Democrats have to - actually have to put forward an affirmative platform on these issues.

MEAD: Do you think anybody will come back to TPP, or do you think that's...

SULLIVAN: I think TPP as - you know, I guess one cardinal rule I have now learned about foreign policy is, trying to do trade deals in election years is a heroic and Herculean task. And I think as a result of the way TPP played out in 2016, a candidate coming forward and just saying, I'm for that. Let's just do that with no adjustments, changes or anything else. I'm taking the Obama deal, and I want to go to the countries who've actually formed their own version of TPP and re-present it. I don't think that will happen. What I do think will happen, though, is you'll hear from several different candidates the idea that we need a multilateral agreement that raises standards and that becomes a central part of our strategy vis-a-vis China. I think the criticism of Trump's tariffs will be about the unique instrument, but even more so, they'll be about the fact that he's slapping tariffs on Canada and Europe when we should be presenting a united front against China. So you're going to hear a lot of logic that's quite similar to TPP, even if the candidates don't use those three letters.

MEAD: OK. So some sort of a move back toward a multilateral approach...

SULLIVAN: Yeah.

MEAD: ...To trade and...

SULLIVAN: A recognition that the WTO is not addressing the fundamental issues of competition, whether it's state-owned enterprises, currency, barriers behind borders and that we need to get together with like-minded partners to set new rules and then give China a choice, whether they want to come in or not come in. I think that's going to be a theme that you hear from a number of candidates in the party.
MEAD: I certainly do think that this - the idea of WTO reform and the idea that the kind of rules of the road people devised in the early ’90s may not be adequate...

SULLIVAN: Right.

MEAD: ...For a much more complicated world - makes a lot of sense.

SULLIVAN: Yeah. But if you try to do it by consensus at the WTO, you're probably...

MEAD: Right.

SULLIVAN: ...Going to run into the same roadblocks they've been running into for years and years. So pull together the open market economies of the world in Europe and Asia and the Americas and say, let's set rules that work for us and then essentially give China a choice. If you want to participate fully in the global economy going forward, 60 percent of the world's economy has now set these new standards, and you got to start reaching.

MEAD: You know, it is something worth noting that the WTO negotiating processes had really ground to a halt.

SULLIVAN: Right.

MEAD: And that's why there was the shift to the regional...

SULLIVAN: Exactly.

MEAD: ...Agreements. Yeah. Getting to China here - you know, there's been, you know - how focused should we be building up - is it a military problem with China? How do you even think about a competition with a country - the Soviet Union stayed out of the economic realm, by and large. China - in some ways, a competition with China would be a much more complex and difficult thing to think about, much less act on. How do you see the Democratic debate going there?

SULLIVAN: Well, you know, it's really interesting that across party lines, Democrats and Republicans - across the lines of policymakers and politicians, you're seeing this emerging consensus around a much more vigorous, aggressive, even somewhat adversarial posture towards China. And so the center of gravity, even as recently as five or 10 years ago, was around cooperative engagement. And now, it has moved to strategic competition. That's reflected in the Trump administration's various national strategy documents, but it's also reflected in the logic and rhetoric of Democratic candidates and Democratic policymakers. My basic problem with having strategic competition be the defining frame for the U.S.-China relationship is that it is a mode. It is not an objective. Like, who wins that competition? And people are adverting increasingly to the analogy of the Cold War or something like it with some of these differences around interdependence and the like.

My problem with that is that the fundamental thrust of American strategy towards the Soviet Union was based on a single premise from George Kennan, which was, the Soviet Union will one day collapse under the weight of its own contradictions, and we can organize a whole multi-decade strategy on the basis of that premise. A, I'm not sure that we could confidently assert that premise vis-a-vis China. And B, I'm not sure, given the level of interdependence with China and the rest of the world, we would root for the outright collapse of China as a going concern the way - what happened to the Soviet Union. So it doesn't work for me. So - and the second thing
is that the main challenge China poses, from my perspective, is not fundamentally a military challenge. There are military dimensions to it, for sure, but I believe that the United States has the wherewithal to be - remain a resident power in the Asia Pacific without getting into a - an arms race with the Chinese. The real issue is the shape of economics and the shape of politics and the shape of technology in the global system. That requires a shift in emphasis from major new investments in weapons systems to major new investments in artificial intelligence, in democratic resilience and in this issue of setting the rules of the road. And my worry is that we fall back into these old - this old muscle memory of the Cold War, and it becomes a military-first strategy. And I just think that makes no sense.

MEAD: I think one of the difficulties for me is I think through, this is the degree to which investment in technology generally is becoming somewhat militarized...

SULLIVAN: Right.

MEAD: ...Since that - but not simply because a lot of people are spending money on military. It's - if you think about AI, it's hard not to think about military implications or any other kind of tech. So we seem to be going in - the research race appears to be becoming a kind of an arms race...

SULLIVAN: Right.

MEAD: ...Of its own.

SULLIVAN: And I just think this is the wrong frame for how to think about the competition between the U.S. and China and AI because what's interesting is that for a country like, say, Bolivia or Zambia, the existence of AI allows them to make massive leaps forward with respect to military capabilities because they're starting from, basically, zero. With the sophistication, the technological and personnel sophistication of the U.S. and Chinese forces, AI will make a difference. But the marginal difference is much smaller, whereas in the economic realm, if either China or the United States was able to advance a AI to the point where that AI itself is generating scientific progress, you're talking about growth rates multiple times what we have now in a country that has some command over that technology vis a vis their competitors. That, to me, is a much bigger worry. How far China goes with hypersonics and swarming drones and all that - OK, yeah, I'm worried about that. We have to deal with that. But economic progress and AI will create so much more leverage, capacity, power, the ability to shape the destiny of regions and the entire globe that, for me, the U.S. strategy should be much less focused on the military applications of AI and much more focused on an Apollo-like project for our country around the economic implications and application of AI.

MEAD: Let's flip from one end of Eurasia to the other for a minute and ask about Russia. Where do you see the democratic discussion of Russia going sort of geopolitically and also in terms of its threat to democracy in the West?

SULLIVAN: You know, I think this debate's going to be highly inflected by politics. It's going to be much more about the interference question than about kind of the more structural strategic issues of what Russia represents. And it will happen, I think, at a fair level of superficiality through the campaign. But it will be tough. It will be - the rhetoric around Russia will be negative. It will be kind of persistent. The view will be that this is a country that does not share America's values and is - with its military modernization - and its use of these information operations to disrupt and undermine democracy in the West is a threat - a serious threat that has to be taken...
seriously. But I predict to you that if a Democrat is elected in 2021, they will be pulled by the same temptation that, basically, every president has been pulled by going back to Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump. We got to work something out with these...

MEAD: Right.

SULLIVAN: ...Guys. And so I think you'll see this pretty harsh, pretty one-dimensional rhetoric through the campaign that's not exactly filled with strategy and then people saying, wait a sec. Is there some kind of modus vivendi we can reach with the Russians if a Democrat is actually elected president?

MEAD: So far, as you say, we've had presidents going back to Bill Clinton looking for that modus vivendi. And so far, we haven't found it.

SULLIVAN: So it's a funny arc you can watch each time. It's sort of...

MEAD: I know.

SULLIVAN: Hey, I can do this. Oh, wait; turns out I can't, just like...

MEAD: Right.

SULLIVAN: ...The last one couldn't.

MEAD: No, there's a tendency, I think, in all these presidents to say, well, the reason - obviously, the reason the Russians are unhappy is because my predecessor was such an idiot. I, however, am a genius. And therefore - so you think we may get another cycle of that.

SULLIVAN: It probably - look. I think the unique character of each of the ways - the way Bush went about it, the way Obama went about it with the reset - are distinct. And each have their own logics that, I think...

MEAD: Right.

SULLIVAN: ...Are - have some merit, actually. I don't think you're going to see something as aggressive as a reset. But I do think that there will be an effort to sit down with Putin and say, what's it going to take to put a floor under this thing? - with respect to strategic stability as we now enter a new intermediate nuclear forces arms race with respect to some kind of reduction in or parameters around the electoral and democracy interference issues and then with respect to issues like Ukraine and Syria. I think that's a sensible thing to do if you're bringing to the table the strength and leverage of reinforcing NATO sanctions and all the rest of it. My problem is, I think, Putin's not particularly interested in that conversation, that he is on a one-dimensional track to continue to undermine and divide the West, starting with the United States. So I think there’ll be an effort. But it'd be an effort that's a little more clear-eyed and tough-minded. And it probably won't go anywhere.

MEAD: Yeah. One of the things that I find so striking about Kennan's essays back in 1948 - the telegram and the long. And the essay is that - he says, you know, our problem with these people really is not that they are Marxists...

SULLIVAN: Right.

MEAD: ...But that they are Russian.
SULLIVAN: Right. Right. Right. Right.

MEAD: And so when the Soviet Union actually fell, everybody in America said, hooray. Kennan is such a genius. And now that they're not communists anymore, we can be friends.

SULLIVAN: Right. Right.

MEAD: So we seem to - our - actually, as somebody who writes essays about foreign policy, I find that discouraging.

SULLIVAN: Yeah, yeah. And it's hard to say. I mean, I have this debate with both - friends of mine are both Republicans and Democrats - around how fundamental, like, how baked-in this adversarial relationship is, or how much it's a function of the unique nature of Russian governance in this phase and whether that could ever change. Because I think as long as Putin is president, it's hard for me to see how he decides, yeah, I want to get to a more positive relationship with these guys because he seems to have a very focused view that it is Russia's job to destroy any remaining shreds of American leadership or, you know, polarity or dominance in the world. And when you have a leader who's fixated on that - very difficult to see anything other than a tense, adversarial relationship result.

MEAD: Now, there has been some discussion among Democrats over Israel policy and the U.S.-Israel relationship in recent weeks. Do you see that as emerging as a significant issue in Democratic politics moving toward 2020 in the presidential race?

SULLIVAN: You know, it will be a significant political issue because it's an issue on the minds of many Americans. So it will come up. It'll come up in debates. It'll come up on the campaign trail with candidates. But I think the idea that there is going to be some big divide within the Democratic Party, or the Democratic Party is going to fundamentally alter its underlying support for the U.S.-Israel relationship is vastly overstated. I think when it comes to everything from security assistance to, you know, a commitment to the United States providing the assets and tools necessary for Israel to defend itself, by itself, to the shared values between our two countries, you're going to hear a lot of that from, I would say, virtually every significant Democratic presidential candidate. The one place where this is going to get interesting for us all to watch is, what happens in the Israeli election? Does Bibi Netanyahu emerge again as the prime minister, if he does? I think there is more tension between kind of where the Democratic Party is right now and the prime minister's government over issues like the degree to which they've allied themselves with certain parties in Israel, certain decisions they've taken. But I think the candidates will be at great pains to say, our objections to particular actions of this government say nothing about our underlying support for the state of Israel. The other factor that we have to watch over 2019 is, does Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt come forward with the big deal, and if they do, how do Democrats end up responding to and relating to that? There you could see a little bit more of the divergence between those who say, you know - though I'll criticize it, I'm sure, but, you know (laughter) - largely say this is in the right direction versus those who take a significantly different view. But I think, you know, what we've seen recently around this issue, to me, does not speak to a larger question around the Democratic Party as to an underlying commitment to the bilateral relationship.

MEAD: So you would sort of see the Obama administration's sometimes prickly but, on the whole, solid relationship with Israeli security sort of a template for a Democratic presidency after 2020?
SULLIVAN: I think so. You know, yeah, I actually think that's quite a good way to put it - that a Democratic president would not hesitate to call out behavior that they found problematic or even morally objectionable, like this arrangement that Bibi has made with a racist right-wing party in Israel. But the underlying continuity of Security Cooperation, the deep consultation over regional issues - I expect that very much to continue.

MEAD: OK. Looking at the news today from places like Algeria and Sudan, we're seeing some of the same democracy activism that we saw back in the Arab Spring. You look at places like Syria, you see chaos, war; repression in other countries. So the Middle East, as a whole, is continuing to look bad and look bad in ways - one gets a feeling a lot of Americans would somehow like to disengage or reduce our commitment there. How does that, do you think, play out on the Democrat...

SULLIVAN: You're going to hear a lot of that. It's funny, you know, Donald Trump is going to hear Democrats talk on the campaign trail and say, hey, that's my line. And Donald Trump's going to say things out on the campaign trail about the Middle East, and Democrats are going to say, hey, that's our line. And there is, I think, between the current occupant of the Oval Office and the major contenders for the Democratic nomination, some convergence around the idea that we need to reduce our military footprint in the Middle East. The phrase, end the forever war, has become, you know, sort of central to the thrust of Democratic Party positioning on these issues. The point about Algerian and Sudan I think is a really interesting one because I believe that the American foreign policy establishment, Democrat and Republican, has kind of lost confidence, to a certain extent, in democracy.

There's been much talk in recent years of the Democratic recession, of the ways in which we're seeing reversals in a lot of places, and confidence, in my view, is a commodity in international relations. If the United States is basically saying, oh, man, we're on the back foot, China and authoritarian systems are on the front foot, that's going to have self-fulfilling - the impact of a self-fulfilling prophecy. So I think we have to look at situations like Algeria, like Sudan, like Ethiopia - other places, too - Armenia, where you're seeing Democrats, and small D Democrats come out in force and reclaim, to a certain extent, this idea that people want to be governed in systems that are legitimate, responsive and give them a voice in their own affairs. And I think the United States has to think about new ways that we do democracy support in the world that is more effective and sustainable than has been true in the past. But these are more reminders that history didn't end in 1989. It also didn't end in 2016 or 2014 or whatever. This is going to be a constant struggle, and the United States has to be on the right side of that struggle and has to be supporting countries as they - or peoples as they try to claim, you know, their legitimate rights and aspirations.

MEAD: This is - for me, as somebody who looked at the history of American foreign policy, this is one of those things you can go back to the Washington administration, and you see the - sort of this pendulum on democracy.

SULLIVAN: Right.

MEAD: Or early French Revolution - oh, my goodness, it's sweeping the world. Reign of Terror - oh, my goodness. It can't happen.

SULLIVAN: Yeah. Right.
MEAD: Same thing with the Spanish - with the Latin American revolutions - ah, new democratic republics. Ugh, they'll never amount to anything. We just keep doing this.

SULLIVAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, because I think we often - and this is especially true in foreign policy conversations - is we tend to see things in these linear directions. Like, once an arrow gets pointed one way, we think, OK, that's going to keep going along for a while. And recognizing that there is going to just be contestation, and the pendulum is going to swing, and we have the capacity to shape the speed and movement of that arc. I think we'd be much better off thinking in those terms. It's hard for us, though, because as Americans, we kind of think of things as, you know, the arc of history going somehow...

MEAD: Yes. Right, we don't like to think that maybe it curves.

SULLIVAN: Yeah.

MEAD: So do you think we will be - would you recommend, say, to Democratic presidential candidates, if any were to ask you for advice, that they come out and say, support democracy promotion in Algeria?

SULLIVAN: Yes. I mean, I think the question is what is the - support democracy in Algeria? Yes. Be prepared to provide resources and support from the United States and rally it from other like-minded countries - yes, absolutely. The question for me about democracy promotion is, the tools and techniques that we have used in the past have sometimes worked and have sometimes not worked. And I think that we need a serious, systematic conversation - that is not about politics or partisanship in the United States - about what does the future of democracy support look like? In my own view, I think we would be much better off getting out of the to-ing and fro-ing of kind of picking winners and losers or supporting political parties of one kind or another and more into the plumbing of open democratic societies - rule of law, anti-corruption efforts, transparency - things that we can stand behind kind of no matter who the personalities are and on which we have proven capabilities. And so I think the U.S. should be making a huge push on that in the world, particularly at a moment when the Chinas and Russias and others are using - are weaponizing corruption as a tool of foreign policy, are using these opaque networks to buy people off, to squeeze people, to undermine democratic systems, to reduce accountability. We've got to have a fully mobilized effort to push back on that. But I think is - would necessarily look different from Clinton-era, Bush-era, even Obama-era kind of traditional American democracy support program.

MEAD: Yeah, I think it is interesting to look at the way that sort of - if you look at how autocracy promotion has evolved and developed, it seems to have learned some things that democracy promotion hasn't.

SULLIVAN: Yeah. Well, it's - you know, there are these kind of global financial networks. There are our reactionary political parties to be funded and stood up. And autocracies also have the vertically integrated capacity to go push this out and to find the dark corners and use the gray areas to weaken the foundations, eat away at the foundations of democracy. We have to recognize this as an act of statecraft, not just as something happening out there in the world, and we need to mobilize our own form of statecraft to push back against it because we have to continue to believe deeply in the idea that, A, it is consistent with our values to support democratic aspirations but, B, it's deeply consistent with our interests to have stable, accountable governance across the world. And this is not just a problem in North Africa, you
know, as we've just been discussing, or in the developing world. It's a problem in Europe. It's a problem in Turkey. It's a problem in Hungary. And, you know, not to mention the illiberal tendencies in other parts of Europe and, frankly, on this side of the Atlantic. So coming up with an integrated kind of theory of the case and strategy for dealing with this I do think is a really important feature of American foreign policy as we go forward.

MEAD: There does seem to be this tendency toward a kind of a personalistic (ph) - it isn't always authoritarian because I wouldn't call, you know, everybody who's doing this. But if you look at Bolsonaro, Duterte, they're very different. But they're - you know, or even Modi to a certain extent - there is this idea of mass democracies are looking to a person rather than to institutions for leadership.

SULLIVAN: Well, there's a fascinating body of literature that sort of existed in obscurity for a while and now is the most relevant stuff out there about voters with authoritarian tendencies, not that they'll be authoritarians but that they look to authoritarians. And that, in a moment of uncertainty and change in the world driven by globalization, by technology, by migration, other factors - the demand signal for that has grown basically across the democratic world. It's grown in the United States, too.

MEAD: I think there's, I mean, I think it's not as simple as authoritarian tendencies. And since it is sort of a class thing that, to some degree, institution - strong institutional governance feels to a lot of people like the upper-middle class knowing everyone else how to live - not even the elite, but a broader group.

SULLIVAN: Yeah. That may be, although the research suggests that, actually, this mindset, this tendency - kind of exists across class lines. But I think you're right that it gets reinforced with the notion that some smaller subset of people - there was this amazing article in The Atlantic and the birth of a new American aristocracy - you know, which people have contested on some of the methodology. But the underlying point, the kind of the top 10 percent has set the rules up in a way that really do benefit them, that people are not wrong to think this about our system and maybe other systems.

MEAD: That's a lot of the energy you see in Democratic politics on both sides.

SULLIVAN: It's, you know, it's how you - now, the story that Trump tells about why we're here has less to do with that group than with immigrants and, you know, sort of Washington elites. But the story that is, I think, increasingly coming center stage on the democratic side has very much to do with a rigged economy of this kind.

MEAD: This is a bit of a problem for a foreign policy elite, which is, if anything, as much elite as anybody else.

SULLIVAN: Right.

MEAD: And when many voters, Democratic or Republican, look at, why aren't things going the way I want - it's because the foreign policy elite, they say, has written the rules in a way that's not good for me.

SULLIVAN: Yeah. Well, you know, it's interesting. I do think there's a legitimate critique of foreign policy professionals in both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, that they viewed themselves as kind of operating in a completely distinct sphere from domestic policy and
what's happening at home. And that disconnection I saw play out in my time in the Obama administration, where, you know, we'd sit around the Situation Room table thinking about national interests and trying to advance and achieve them. And no one said, OK, how do we think about the plight of the American middle class and what foreign policy tools and instruments we have to somehow strengthen that? That severing of that connection - which, I think, has emerged over the last, say, 30 years - whereas the people right after World War II were thinking very much about that issue...

MEAD: Yes, yes, yes.

SULLIVAN: ...And the Germans were thinking about and the Indians are thinking about, that the Chinese are thinking about, that we need to reconnect that in a big way. And until we do, then people basically saying, these foreign policy types don't have my interests at heart, they're not right in a kind of philosophical sense that, you know, the foreign policy community is out for some soulless international...

MEAD: Sort of, aha, we've pauperized another million middle-class people.

SULLIVAN: Right. But it's right that it is not a sufficient priority in foreign policy decision-making, and it has to become that. And this is something I feel particularly passionately about - figuring out how you reintegrate foreign and domestic policy into an American strategy that works for the American people.

MEAD: No, I think it was clear in the Republican primaries last time around that it was that gap that gave Trump a tremendous advantage over a number of other candidates.

SULLIVAN: It's quite surprising that if you take Barack Obama and George W. Bush and look at their domestic economic agenda, they were very different - in values, in policies, in objectives, in the story they told about the American economy. If you look at George W. Bush's and Barack Obama's foreign economic policy agenda, they were basically identical. That's weird. And that is the result of foreign economic policy being kind of - existing in this separate space, sort of very elite-driven. And breaking out of that, I think, is important for both parties.

MEAD: I do get a sense sometimes that, both in economic policy and in foreign policy, we've had - the professors have had a little bit too much of - and you and I now are both professors. So maybe I should be a little careful here. But that, you know, there's this - OK, we have a theory and this - we should just follow the theory, while earlier generations of foreign policy people and economic policy people - most said, yes, well, there's some big ideas about how the world works, but how do you build something in these circumstances for this situation in time?

SULLIVAN: Yeah, I think that's - I buy that to a certain extent. I guess I would say - the issue is less, who is doing it? Is it people sort of more focused on theory than practice - is less important to me than, are people consistently testing whether the theory actually plays out? And lots of professors do do that, you know? So I think something else is going on than the personnel. And what I think a lot of it has to do with is muscle memory. It's - we develop a certain way of doing things, and then it's hard for us to break out of that without a disruptive moment. And what Trump offered in 2016 for good - and, I think, almost entirely for ill - is that disruptive moment. And so it has allowed even professors to say, OK, what do we do now? How do we do things differently?
MEAD: Right. I guess what I'm trying to get at is, you would look at, say, the economic performance since the 1990s. And what you would see - and I would agree with this - is that the spread of free trade around the world has done an extraordinary job of lifting...

SULLIVAN: Right, right, right.

MEAD: ...People all over the world out of poverty. And all of these benefits that we hear about in theory are happening. But was it happening in a way that created a sustainable political base for this kind of policy?

SULLIVAN: Right. Political base, or was actually the thing that every economist would tell you happens, which is, overall, we win. There are some losers, and we compensate the losers. That's kind of how it goes. Did anyone pause and say, well, you know, did the people who get hurt by these trade deals actually get any compensation or get an...

MEAD: What would that even mean?

SULLIVAN: What would that mean? Did we - no, we just had kind of these small TAA programs and - not a lot to it. I totally agree with that. And for me, though, the real reason why that happened more than anything else is this wall between foreign policy and domestic policy. Foreign policy people went out and did the trade deals and didn't look over that wall to say, hey, was the whole thing on the domestic side kind of working out? They just let that not happen for a really long time.

MEAD: Right. Well, of course, if we listen to the structural realists, there - you know, there's no connection between domestic politics and foreign policy. I take it you're not a structural realist.

SULLIVAN: I wrote a review in Foreign Affairs - a long review...

MEAD: I noticed this. Yes.

SULLIVAN: Steve Walt and John Mearsheimer's books that - you know, I was able to restrain my enthusiasm for their views. I mean - so they make some good points. In fact...

MEAD: Yeah.

SULLIVAN: ...What's interesting about Mearsheimer is although he's, of course, the classic structural realist - is he is the guy who is reminding us persistently that nationalism really matters. And in a sense, that's a nod to the fact that, you know, there's something other than the billiard balls in the international...

MEAD: I mean, I think this is a problem for a lot of realists. They try to talk about billiard balls, but they keep noticing that the billiard balls behave oddly.


MEAD: In some ways, this was the whole thing behind "The Israel Lobby" book that - wait a minute. I have a beautiful theory of international relations. And it doesn't predict this happening.

SULLIVAN: Right. Right. Right.

MEAD: So - but again, that, to me, comes down to the professors getting very theoretical in their treatment. And the same thing you could say about some of the international - you know, liberal internationalists that...
SULLIVAN: Yeah.

MEAD: There's a trajectory, there's a theory this is going to happen.

SULLIVAN: Yeah. Yeah. It's true - I think it's absolutely true that insufficient attention has been paid to the domestic impacts of foreign policy choices, both politically and substantively. And I think people have been shaken from that to a certain extent. Now, we will see if having been shaken - that translates into more effective policy going forward.

MEAD: Let me ask you what I think may be the toughest real question facing American foreign policy right now - should be the situation in Venezuela where you've got a situation where you have a massive humanitarian problem. Clearly, it's destabilizing the country and places around it. There are all sorts of issues going on. Getting militarily or in other ways involved in Latin American countries has not always been America's strongest suit - can be incredibly divisive, domestically, triggers all kinds of memories going back to the 1980s and before. How would you advise a presidential candidate about how to talk about Venezuela and how to think about Venezuela policy?

SULLIVAN: You know, I would say that a military solution driven by the United States is too big a risk to entertain, and therefore, the United States should be focused on all of the non-military tools we can bring to bear. And that means doubling down on the sanctions pieces and continuing to build the international coalition around this and particularly focus on breaking off China, Cuba and Russia from Venezuela through whatever means we have available to us because those, effectively, are the lifelines. Now, if the countries of the region, if the Colombias and Brazils and others, decide that they want to take more aggressive action, that's up to them. But that should not be...

MEAD: I noticed you mentioned Colombia and Brazil. You left Mexico out of it.

SULLIVAN: Well, Mexico's - right - in this sort of interesting position. What I would be pushing Lopez Obrador on is to actually try to be a constructive actor in brokering some kind of dialogue or some kind of process here. If he's not going to throw all in with this coalition of countries that's come together - I understand...

MEAD: Right.

SULLIVAN: ...His politics, his ideology and so forth. But he then has a role to play, and he should be stepping up to play it.

MEAD: More pressure on Cuba would be a part of this.

SULLIVAN: I think a combination of more pressure on Cuba and showing Cuba that there might be something in it for them if they were willing to help us solve this. I don't feel that the Trump administration taking the position it did on Cuba, kind of dialing back the Obama administration outreach, has been fundamentally in America's national security interests. And this is one reason why. I think if we had better channels into Havana right now and we were sitting down with Raul Castro and saying, look...

MEAD: Well, with diplomats falling prey to mysterious illnesses, it was a little tricky.

SULLIVAN: That is true. That is true. I still, to this day, having - was not in government during that time, so I have no sense of the extent to which that was the Cubans or, you know, how that
all went down. But I would say that why - you know, Cuba's tie to Venezuela has a revolutionary dimension to it. But I think the central dimension is cheap fuel. And if the United States could construct a door B for Cuba that said, you know, here's a way for you to, you know, replace the fuel problems from Venezuela, now work with us to get Maduro out of here, that's something worth exploring - to go along with pressure that we may bring to bear.

MEAD: And to flip back to the Middle East, it's 2021. We have a Democratic president. Iran is still abiding by the provisions of the JCPOA. Would you suggest, at that point, that we go back to it? What's the future of our Iran policy given where we are?

SULLIVAN: I would suggest that if Iran continues to abide by its commitments under the JCPOA, that the U.S. rejoin the JCPOA and open negotiations on a follow-on agreement.

MEAD: And if not?

SULLIVAN: And if not, what?

MEAD: If Iran does not continue...

SULLIVAN: Oh.

MEAD: ...To abide by the...

SULLIVAN: Well, then, I think, we'll have to see how that plays out. But at that point, we're, you know - let's say they begin increasing their centrifuge capacity or building up their stockpile or, you know, whatever the thing may be. Then the U.S. is going to have to continue to use a heavy sanctions tool to try to bring them back into compliance. But, basically, my message would be - in January of 2021, if they were out of compliance, would be to say, you've got to come back to the table or the sanctions are only going to get worse for you. If you come back to the table, we are prepared to, number one, recreate the terms of the JCPOA and then, number two, deal with this issue of timelines so that we're pushing out the dates into the future, which, I think, is an option available to the United States. And we can pull that off. The one thing I object to is this notion that at the bargaining table between the U.S. and Iran or between the P5+1 and Iran, we are going to settle the issue of Syria and Lebanon and Yemen. That - I don't buy this idea that the JCPOA is somehow inadequate because it didn't resolve all of these regional issues. Those issues have to be resolved. They have to be resolved with a combination of American pressure and diplomacy, working with our allies and partners. But I think they have to be resolved separate from the nuclear issue.

MEAD: Again, it gets - and, I think, very - part of the problem one has is with both parties and the U.S. looking to get out of the Middle East, one has to start thinking, what is our leverage not only with the Iranians but with other parties there?

SULLIVAN: Yeah. I mean, I guess the question that I would pose is, you know, if we properly judge Iran to be a strategic and structural threat in the Middle East, is the answer, let's have a lot of American troops there potentially, you know, to fight them at some point? I don't find that to be a particularly compelling allocation of American resources in a world full of challenges that we need to grapple with. So we're going to have to get creative about how we build that leverage. And a lot of that means reinforcing friends and partners in the region but also thinking about, what is a long-term outcome here that can work for everybody? And I think, you know, Yemen seems to be a place we could start. And then, for me, you know, while we continue to
have some modicum of leverage in the Syria context, finding a way to work with a range of actors to try to put some left and right limits around Iran there, I think these are available options to us if we’re smart about doing it. And they don’t - getting out of the Middle East, quote, unquote, "militarily" or reducing our overall military footprint does not mean the United States is not going to be a significant security broker in the region going forward through diplomacy and a series of other tools.

**MEAD:** Well, listen. Thanks, Jake. I hope many people here and watching on TV now know why I find Jake to be such an interesting and important voice in American foreign policy. Thanks for coming. And thanks for showing us that it’s possible to have really serious, interesting discussion at a time even when the country seems a little bit polarized.

**SULLIVAN:** Thanks, Walter. I really appreciate it.