U.S. Grand Strategy in the Middle East

Event Transcript:

Featuring:

Jake Sullivan

Nonresident Senior Fellow,
Geoeconomics and Strategy Program,
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

June 22, 2020

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES | MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

Jon Alterman:

Good afternoon and welcome to CSIS. I'm Jon Alterman, senior vice president, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and the director of the Middle East Program. It is my pleasure to welcome not only you today, but also our special guest, Jake Sullivan.

Jake is a non-resident senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Last year, he was a visiting scholar at both Yale and Dartmouth. He had a series of senior roles in the Obama administration, including national security adviser to Vice President Biden as the director of the policy planning staff, and deputy chief of staff to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

He has been very prolific in recent months, writing many things including what I thought was a really interesting article on the *Foreign Affairs* webpage that he wrote with Daniel Benaim called "America's Opportunity in the Middle East." He argues that the region's current economic and defense insecurity creates an opportunity for what he calls "aggressive U.S. diplomacy." The centerpiece that he argues for is a structured regional dialogue that the United States facilitates in cooperation with its partners.

Jake, I hope you're keeping safe and healthy, and thanks very much for joining us.

Jake Sullivan:

I really appreciate getting the opportunity to come in. It's good to see you virtually through the computer portal, Jon.

Jon Alterman:

Thank you very much. My colleague, Tony Cordesman, today put out a commentary which said, "No one in the Gulf can now predict the level of U.S. commitment to staying in the region or of the risk that U.S. pressure on Iran will provoke a war. Dependence on the United States is now coupled to a region-wide lack of trust." Your article talks about "balancing anxiety with reassurance." How do you build from the baseline that Tony described, to balancing anxiety and reassurance, to getting to where we need to go?

Jake Sullivan:

Well, I would start by observing something that's sort of a cousin to the observation that Tony Cordesman was making, which is a point that we make in our article. That is that I think key leaders in the Gulf in particular are recognizing that there is no *deus ex machina*. The kind of neocon *deus ex machina* of the Bush-Cheney years wasn't going to deliver them. Nor is the Trump-Bolton-Pompeo "maximum pressure campaign" against Iran going to deliver them. They recognize that they're going to have to take matters into their own hands to a more significant degree. That presents an opportunity.

Now, on the other hand, if all we do then is say, "You guys are left to your own devices. Good luck. We're out of here," that could produce deleterious outcomes, including hedging behavior and choices born more of insecurity than of a sense of confidence.

My view is that the direct answer to your question about how you deal with the Cordesman

> ***[Let's] find a path forward that will involve a continuing U.S. commitment in the region on the one hand, but will also involve a rebalance or recalibration away from a primarily military approach to one that accentuates and emphasizes diplomacy to a much greater degree.***

problem is by being more realistic and more constrained in terms of what we can pledge. This is from the perspective of delivering on security outcomes that the Gulf states want, such as toppling the Iranian regime or getting the Iranian regime to crumble, which has been the message the current administration has been sending. Rather to say, let's all collectively be realistic about what we can accomplish and find a path forward that will involve a continuing U.S. commitment in the region on the one hand, but will also involve a rebalance or recalibration away from a primarily military approach to one that accentuates and emphasizes diplomacy to a much greater degree.

IRAN

Jon Alterman:

That requires the Iranians playing ball, and the question is how do you get the Iranians to a place where they want to play ball?

When you were in the Obama administration, there was a long period of time when there were talks between the United States and the Iranians that didn't get anywhere, because President Ahmadinejad was the president. You had that secret meeting in Oman with Bill Burns in March 2013 that led to the JCPOA negotiations, but what it hinged on was the Rouhani election. There's an Iranian election coming up in May or June of next year. How important is the outcome of that election for how the United States approaches security relationships with the Iranians and with the Gulf more broadly?

The election of Rouhani was not irrelevant toward the outcome of nuclear diplomacy, but it's also not dispositive.

Jake Sullivan:

Look, it's not irrelevant. The election of Rouhani was not irrelevant toward the outcome of nuclear diplomacy, but it's also not dispositive. Because at the end of the day, the Iranian calculus is going to be driven more out of a combination of where the Supreme Leader, and the IRGC, and the Supreme Council on National Security are than where the president's office is. So, what I think that election will tell us is something about the grip of the hardliners on the regime. Yes, I am still one who believes that while the kind of caricature of the reformists on the one hand and the hardliners on the other hand isn't quite right—that there is a diversity of opinion within the Iranian leadership and that we have to pay attention to that.

I think it will tell us something. I think if you end up with somebody in that role who acts in a deeply adversarial way towards any form of diplomacy, either with the West or with regional actors, that will have an impact, but I do not think it is going to be the key. I think the key question for Iran is if it is offered a choice between continuing substantial economic pressure and some mode of engagement with other actors in the region, whether they find a way to get to the table. You're right, that's an open question. They may just say no. The Saudis may just say no, but my view is that the United States should be putting a lot more chips down on the table to try to generate the start of that kind of conversation than has happened under the Trump administration over the last three years.

Jon Alterman:

Is the beginning of that a return to the JCPOA parameters? If so, what are the mechanics that you think the U.S. should follow returning to the JCPOA parameters?

Jake Sullivan:

Well, I think we have to see where we are in January of 2021. It absolutely means returning to a nuclear agreement with Iran if Iran returns to a nuclear agreement, and then working on negotiating a follow-on agreement that deals with additional issues and that continues to secure American interests over the longer term. The real question, though—and what we grapple with in our article—is how do you relate nuclear diplomacy, on the one hand, to regional diplomacy on the other? I definitely do not want to be advocating for holding the former hostage to the latter, because, of course, it is possible the latter doesn't go anywhere.

I think it is important that we return to a durable set of understandings on the nuclear file that can be enforced and implemented over the course of the next several years. But my view is you can have an informal linkage between these two. You can get some early wins on the nuclear program but tie long term sanctions relief to progress on both files. For me, thinking in those terms is something that we should contemplate as we go forward.

Jon Alterman:

So, it'll be a temporary waiver of sanctions. As you know, I mean, the Iranians bitterly complained that some of the sanctions were lifted, but the bank still wouldn't lend to Iran. They ask for more and more and more help. Is there a danger that they just won't trust the U.S. diplomacy going forward? If so, how do you address that danger?

Jake Sullivan:

There is a danger and that's why I think it's important for the United States to not tie its hands in the way that I think Mike Pompeo and the Trump administration have tied their hands. They've set out this set of demands that Mike Pompeo laid out in the Heritage Foundation speech a couple of years ago that are simply unrealistic and unreasonable. As a result, there can be no progress on the nuclear file, because Pompeo was tying progress on the nuclear file to cutting off support for Hezbollah, removing all troops from Syria, and completely eliminating a ballistic missile program down the line, in addition to what I think are wholly unrealistic demands on the nuclear program itself.

I do not believe that that is the right course going forward, that we should just hold hostage one for the other. It's more going to be about feel. It's going to be about sensing whether there's an opportunity as we go forward. Rather than put these two issues in complete silos and have them be utterly divorced from one another, finding ways to more informally connect and see, "Is it possible to get a short term win on the nuclear file to basically get Iran back into compliance with the JCPOA and to then put the longer term disposition of Iran's nuclear program on a negotiating track? At the same time, in parallel, put some of these regional issues on a negotiating track that's actually led by the region, not led by the United States?"

I think that's at least something that we have to test. I wouldn't immediately jump to an outcome of the removal of all sanctions or move forward without at least testing whether some kind of linkage in parallel of these two tracks can work. But here's a really important point: The way that critics of the JCPOA talked about the agreement is they argued, "Why didn't you, the P5+1, do a deal in which you dealt with all these regional issues?" My answer to them is the P5+1 is not the right group to resolve the level and extent of Iranian activity, behavior, presence, et cetera in the region. That is for the regional actors to decide.

I utterly reject the notion that what should be happening is the United States out there by

> ***What the United States should be doing is chiefly negotiating the nuclear file, but then facilitating and standing behind and supporting a regional negotiation where the protagonists are the regional actors themselves.***

itself negotiating the outcome of all of these regional issues with Iran. No, what the United States should be doing is chiefly negotiating the nuclear file, but then facilitating, standing behind, and supporting a regional negotiation where the protagonists are the regional actors themselves.

Jon Alterman:

Or the regional actors are often antagonists. Your article talks about the Saudis. I thought it was notably silent on the Israeli role, and the Israelis were among the most vociferous opponents of the JCPOA. As you think about this structure of a regional dialogue on security that involves Israel, Iran and others, what is the role for Israel?

Jake Sullivan:

This is why in our piece, we both raise and reject the notion of a formal regional organization with flags and a building and so forth to run this process, because it immediately runs headlong into the type of challenge like, "Is Israel a part of it or not a part of it?" and so forth. Instead, we think of this in much more informal terms with what we call "variable geometry," where different groups of countries are in the room with one another making their views known, making their bottom lines known.

Israel would have to be a part of that broader, more informal process. That would involve considerable consultation with all the outside powers, including the United States. It would involve considerable consultation with some of the key Sunni players in the region, which may be done in more informal channels and indirectly. And then similar to the way that we've seen communication unfold—although albeit indirect communication over Syria—messages can be passed.

Messages can be sent on a diplomatic basis so that Iran and Israel can also better understand where each other are coming from and what the "or else" is. For example, if Israel is to say, "Look, we expect the following to occur in Syria. If it doesn't, these are the steps we're going to take." I think all of that can be worked out on an informal basis without prescribing up front what the exact modalities would look like. It would allow for Israel's very legitimate security interests to be factored into any kind of diplomacy that went forward.

Jon Alterman:

Although, the technical stuff is easier to work through than the strategic stuff. I think Israelis across the board genuinely believe that Iran poses an existential threat to Israel. I think Iranians across the board, at least in the government, believe that Israel really is trying to overthrow the Islamic Republic. While you can agree tactically on targeting or something else, when it comes to the broader objective, I wonder how one addresses a really pretty fundamental assessment that the other side is an existential threat.

Jake Sullivan:

I recognize that in a moment of deep pessimism in the region, sounding this more optimistic note can almost sound pie in the sky. I just really want to underscore—and I think a fair reading of our article would underscore—we're clear-eyed about the

challenges here. Even at the most ambitious, a diplomatic initiative like this would never produce peace. It would never produce Iran and Israel saying, "Okay, now we're friends again"—as long as the current Iranian regime is in power in Tehran, at least.

The most that we would be talking about would be the kinds of tactical steps that could allow a broader de-escalation, reduce the possibility of war; increase the possibility of a sustainable, durable kind of set of understandings that could create more opportunities for the region to make economic, social, and security progress.

So, from my perspective, it's not really a critique of our proposal to say, "Iran and Israel, they're never going to see eye-to-eye at a strategic level," because we bake that in. Of course, they're not, nor are Saudi and Iran going to see eye-to-eye at a strategic level. But can they get on a path of de-escalation, where at least that strategic divergence does not result in the kind of potential escalatory cycles that could lead to conflict? That's essentially what we're arguing for.

Jon Alterman:

You've worked the Iranian problem for years. One of the Iranian go-to moves are gray zone operations—they're not really war, they're not really peace. They're often hard to attribute. They often use asymmetrical forces and proxies. The Iranians often, I think, have convinced themselves that this is the only way to improve their bargaining position against stronger powers.

How do you see dealing with the Iranian instinct that if things are going poorly, they try to do something to increase their bargaining position—i.e. do something hostile? If things are going well, it reinforces their sense that "Aha! Showing our strength improves our bargaining position." So again, they do something that's vaguely hostile but hard to really say crosses the line.

Jake Sullivan:

It's a vicious cycle. It really is, right? It's what makes this such a difficult proposition, because my answer to you at a 30,000-foot level is pretty straightforward. You balance pressure and diplomacy so that you're maintaining some degree of leverage to push back against and try to coerce the Iranians out of choosing to go down that road. But that's only satisfying at a very theoretical level. The issue is practically, actually implementing something like that, particularly when there is deniability, attribution issues, and historic practice of Iran being able to kind of say, "Oh, those are just our proxies doing it. We didn't direct them. So, we told them not to."

By the way, this is a problem that U.S.-Russian diplomacy is increasingly running into when it comes to issues around little green men in Eastern Ukraine and so forth. I recognize the challenge. I would argue, though, that for the last 25 years, we've looked at problems in the Middle East and basically said, "Let's put together a military operation to produce an outcome in a place like Iraq, ultimately to try to have a long term success vis-à-vis ISIS; or we'll have a military force posture and presence in the Gulf to deal with Iran; or the support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.The United

> ***It's going to require a mix of pressure and incentives and a choreography that is going to be devilishly hard, but I would much rather give it a shot on the diplomatic side in a way the United States has not done and see if we can make progress in that regard.***

States has consistently said, "We could be pretty ambitious in terms of our military ends or the application of military force or leverage to produce outcomes." Then when people like you raise the kinds of practical objections you're raising now, though different in the military context than the diplomatic context, they're kind of waved away. So, we'll overcome that.

The result has not been very good for U.S. policy towards the Middle East. I guess what I'm advocating is any course of action is going to be immensely difficult and fraught with challenges and peril. It's going to require a mix of pressure and incentives and a choreography that is going to be devilishly hard. But I would much rather give it a shot on the diplomatic side in a way the United States has not done and see if we can make some progress in that regard. If the answer ultimately is: "You know what? Actually, it turns out that for a variety of reasons, neither side really wants to come to the table. You can't really enforce the bargains. The Iranians are going to take advantage of it in some way." [Even so,] I don't actually think it will put us in a materially worse position if we take these steps than if we don't.

That's why what Dan and I are basically arguing in the piece is to give this a shot. You're not holding back any particular interest with respect to the nuclear file by doing this. You're not closing off your options to apply various forms of coercion and pressure down the road. What you're doing is trying to take the tools at your disposal and direct them towards some kind of minimal diplomatic momentum. Frankly, our view is that come early 2021, both sides are going to have plenty of reasons not to do it, but some reasons to do it that haven't been as existent in the past many years. That's why we think this is worth giving it a shot.

SAUDI ARABIA

Jon Alterman:

I want to talk about the broader challenges of diplomacy, and we've talked about our adversaries. Let's talk about our friends who also pose a fairly stiff set of challenges. You spoke just last week about the importance of values in our foreign policy. We have friends in the Gulf with whom we share lots of interests. Some values, we share. Some values, we don't share. What role should differing attitudes toward political rights, human rights, play in our bilateral relations with friends in the Gulf? I think not exclusively, but one of the key indicators is what should an appropriate response have been to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi?

Jake Sullivan:

Look, I think it has to play a more central role—as I said last week—than it has, and that includes in our relationship with Saudi Arabia. Which is to say that in our strategic dialogue with Saudi Arabia, having at the highest levels a consistent message that says that the strength of our relationship will depend on progress, on questions related to human rights and political and economic reform. To the extent that the Saudi leadership or the crown prince act in ways that are inconsistent with an understanding of making some progress, or

To the extent that the Saudi leadership or the crown prince act in ways that are inconsistent with an understanding of making some progress, or in the extreme case, like with Jamal Khashoggi, the United States should take action in response.

in the extreme case, like with Jamal Khashoggi, the United States should take action in response.

So, I think the appropriate action in response would have been a) more aggressive public condemnation of what happened there than we saw from the Trump administration, b) a greater demand for transparency and accountability for exactly what happened and accounting for those who are responsible for it, and c) securing a set of pledges from the Saudi government about what they were going to do going forward to make sure that this kind of thing and things like it don't happen again.

Now, can we move Saudi Arabia from where it is now to where we want it to be on a political and human rights basis overnight? No. But should we basically say, "In part, our long-term support for your country is going to be bound up in the directionality of progress and reform?" I think we should.

I think that if the United States took that posture and was consistent and steadfast in doing so, it would produce some changes in the decision making of the Saudi leadership, which under the Trump administration, because they basically have had a blank check, has gone in the wrong direction on jailing dissidents, curbing speech, punishing women, and murdering a U.S. resident and prominent journalist in a grotesque and almost sort of ostentatious way. That is in my view the result of basically saying, "We don't care about these issues," which has been the message for the last three years. I think the United States has to say, "We are prepared to put it on the line for this set of issues."

Jon Alterman:

Although, the Saudi argument that I've heard from the ambassador and others, and I've heard actually from the U.S. Ambassador sometimes, is that they are making reforms. They're not necessarily all the reforms we want. They're not the reforms as fast as we'd like, but they are changing the economy. Women are driving, women can travel more freely. It is all going in a positive direction except for the political. They would argue that reining in the religious police and everything else is a sign that broadly, the Saudis are moving in the right direction. It's just not the order we want. If you jeopardize this, then you jeopardize the whole movement toward openness and reform in Saudi Arabia. Is that just the difference of opinion, or is there something fundamentally flawed with that argument?

Jake Sullivan:

I think this comes down to a question of credibility. I think it is easy to sketch out and put a PowerPoint forward that says, "Here's going to be our sequence. Here's how we're going to do it, and we're hitting these benchmarks" and so forth. But ultimately, it's a gut check question of whether you actually think that that narrative is the right narrative or whether the right narrative is that they're trying for a model that involves substantial economic reform; modest kind of, shall we call it cultural reform; but a hardening on the political side, a tightening of the political vise.

Jon Alterman:

Which I would argue is the China model.

Jake Sullivan:

Exactly. Whether you think that's more where the evidence points—you're much more of an expert on Saudi than I am—but my view, based on everything I've seen, is that we have real reason to believe it is the latter account as opposed to the former account. Given we have real reason to believe that, it means that we are going to need more shows of some progress on the

political front in order for the current leadership in Saudi Arabia to establish credibility that, in fact, this ultimately over time is going to be a sequencing question.

We need to decouple [physical U.S. troop presence in the region] the notion of U.S. staying power or U.S. support.

Jon Alterman:

It seems to me, ultimately, our leverage comes from the Saudis having a conviction that there actually is a possibility where we would be a strong partner, we would be invested in them, we would do all those sorts of things. If they perceive that we're looking for the door anyway, and maybe this is a convenient excuse, it doesn't really matter. There's no way to build the centrality to the U.S. back up, because we're done with oil, and we have unconventional oil and gas, and all those things. How do we convince all the countries in the Gulf that we're reducing our presence, but they should seek to do more for us because they need us to be more central than we have any intention of being?

Jake Sullivan:

This comes back to the first question you asked about anxiety versus reassurance, and it is difficult under any circumstances. It is uniquely difficult in the environment we find ourselves in, where all of the countries of the Middle East see the United States on a bipartisan basis, looking for the exit. So, I think there are three pieces to the answer for me.

The first is physical U.S. troop presence in the region. We need to decouple that from the notion of U.S. staying power or U.S. support. I think we can reduce our overall footprint in the region over time, including, by the way, our footprint in Saudi Arabia itself. Too often, we default to adding more troops to the region as an answer to proving that we're engaged.

Second is that I think we should deepen our support for Saudi in terms of the legitimate threats it faces, that we've seen it face over the course of the past two years, whether it's ballistic missiles coming from Yemen, drones and missiles coming from the Iranians, or cyber-attacks. I think the United States should go even deeper from the point of view of its technical assistance and security cooperation on that set of issues.

And then the third is exactly what Dan and I are arguing in our article, that the U.S. should say, "We are going to be here applying various forms of leverage, including economic leverage as well as military dimensions, apart from whether we have 20,000 more troops or 10,000 less troops there. We're going to be present. We're going to be driving. We're going to be pushing people to the table. We're going to be holding Iran's feet to the fire. We're going to be rounding up the outside powers to get behind a process. In that process, we will look out for your core interests."

So, I think putting those three together while also saying, "Look, here's the deal. It's going to have to change this relationship between us as it relates to these questions of values and human rights," especially in a world in which democracy is under pressure and the authoritarian capitalist model is on the march. The United States has to say to Saudi, "Look, we're not in for you guys deciding, 'Hey, the China model is just where it's at.'"

So I think there is a way to put all this together with honesty, clarity, deep relationship-building at a very personal level, and then kind of finding a way to separate out the question of physical force presence from continuing U.S. staying power in the Middle East.

Jon Alterman:

In your mind, was the Trump administration's response to the attacks on the Abqaiq oil facilities just about right?

Jake Sullivan:

Well, in so far as my view was that the United States shouldn't start a war with Iran over that at that broad level. Jon, the problem I have in answering that question is we never should have been there. I mean, in a way, that was the predictable outcome of a deeply flawed U.S. strategy in which we overpromised to the Gulf. We said, "If we put on maximum pressure, Iran's going to come out with its hands up and basically surrender everything and capitulate our demands," which they did not do. Rather than recognizing what would actually happen, which is Iran would play its cards, which included advancing its nuclear program, attacking shipping in the Gulf, and attacking the Abqaiq oil facility, for which we had no ready reply.

I don't want to be stuck with the bill of a set of failed decisions that led up to that moment. My view is it should have never come to that, and it would not have come to that if the United States had maintained a more sensible strategy towards Iran that it was handed off by the Obama administration. I would also say, though, that Saudis kind of looked at all that, probably also didn't want the United States to be starting a war with Iran, but also recognized, "Geez, these guys are not going to be our saviors." We've got to think differently about how we approach the issue of Iran writ large in the region. That's part of the reason that I believe we actually have a potential diplomatic opportunity, narrow as the window may be in the coming months and years.

We've got to think differently about how we approach the issue of Iran writ large in the region. That's part of the reason that I believe we actually have a potential diplomatic opportunity.

YEMEN

Jon Alterman:

In another article in *Foreign Affairs*, Mara Karlin and Tammy Wittes talk about how the U.S. military presence in the Gulf sort of creates a moral hazard, because Gulf states feel empowered to do all sorts of reckless things. I think one of the concerns that people have is that Yemen has been a fiasco from the start to finish of a Saudi intervention that started five years ago. Was it a mistake for the United States not to block Saudi intervention in 2015?

As we think about trying to resolve the situation, what I hear from people on the ground is the Saudis do seem to be trying to find the door. The problem is the Houthis don't want to find a door and want to hold on, because they think they will continue to get a better deal. So, first is: how do you deal with a state actor like Saudi Arabia that's feeling its oats and decides to do something, but then how do you deal with non-state actors over whom the United States doesn't have much leverage at all?

Jake Sullivan:

I struggle with the 2015 decision, because I understand why the Obama administration decided to provide some support. The theory was basically that we can shape this in a better way, and we can keep the Saudis from doing things that are even more problematic if we have some level of participation. I understand that calculus. It turned out to be wrong. Many officials in the Obama

administration subsequently came out and said, "Look, the theory didn't bear out." Now, basically, everyone involved in Yemen policy in the Obama administration has said, "End the support for the Saudi-led effort," a view I very strongly believe.

I don't think we should be providing any further assistance to Saudi Arabia, militarily or otherwise, as they continue to prosecute this campaign. I think it's played into Iran's hands. I think it has only strengthened the Houthis. It's dragged Saudi into the kind of quagmire that it's now looking to get itself out of. So, that's the easy part. For me, the hard part is okay, but what do you do about the Houthis as they continue to gain in technological capability and pose a threat, not just to Yemen but to Saudi itself? What can the United States do to help Saudi Arabia defend itself? There, I think there's a couple things.

The United States can do more with Saudi and with other partners and allies, including Europeans, to engage in interdiction operations, to stop the flow of weapons to the extent it continues from Iran to the Houthis.

One is the United States can do more with Saudi and with other partners and allies, including Europeans, to engage in interdiction operations, to stop the flow of weapons to the extent it continues from Iran to the Houthis. The second is to be able to have responses if and when there is—say there's a ballistic missile attack—the United States should be helping the Saudis deal in a much more targeted, narrow way, with both defending itself and responding to that, to show the Houthis their real cost to doing so.

But all of that falls way short of diving into the middle of the Yemeni Civil War and getting bogged down in it and contributing to a humanitarian catastrophe that exceeds anything else the world has faced, with the combination of violence, disease, starvation, and everything else in Yemen these past few years. So, that's how I would think about it.

Going back to one of your previous questions about, "Okay, how do you, on the one hand, withdraw military support, and then, on the other hand, tell the Saudis, 'Hey, we want to work with you to produce a more constructive outcome in the region'?" This is a good example of that. You'd say, "Look, we're no longer in for a completely problematic, morally bankrupt policy that you are pursuing right now. On the other hand, we are therefore protecting you, imposing costs on the Houthis, imposing costs on Iran as it engages with the Houthis. Let's come up with a more targeted, limited, narrow strategy that is more sustainable and will ultimately be more successful."

I actually think that we've come to the point where Saudi leadership would welcome that conversation because they recognize that just the reflexive "Well, whatever you want will be there for you," has not produced particularly positive outcomes over the course of the past three years.

LEADING WITH DIPLOMACY

Jon Alterman:

To be fair, looking at the other parts of the region, the sense that we're not really there, that we don't have a dog in it, hasn't given us a big footprint in determining the outcome of the war in Syria, the outcome of the war in Libya, where now we have NATO allies aligned on other sides of this war. Libya was one where the Obama administration quite purposefully did not

lead from the front. Syria was one where the Obama administration was trying to do diplomacy but in a more supportive way where we weren't in the front lines.

What should we be learning from these ongoing conflicts in Syria and Libya where the United States has not been able to shape the diplomacy, the United States has not been able to shape the terms of an outcome, let alone bring these things close to completion, because people perceive that if you're not there, at least with some military footprint, then you're not really playing.

Jake Sullivan:

Right. I've obviously spent a huge amount of time thinking about the outcomes in these places.

Jon Alterman:

That's why I'm asking you.

Jake Sullivan:

In Iraq, we go in with a massive invasion force and it doesn't turn out particularly well. In Libya, we do just the air campaign with no boots on the ground and it doesn't turn out well. In Syria, we do neither and it doesn't turn out well. So, what is the common denominator across all of the possible modes? In Yemen, we support another country with pure logistical, and refueling, and munitions support, but don't actually participate, and it doesn't turn out well.

So, the answers are once you have a civil conflict in one of these countries in the Middle East, the United States is not necessarily in a great position to produce a positive outcome. So, starting from that premise, if I were going back to the period of 2011, 2012, 2013, in Syria, I would have advocated for doing more to accomplish less. I think a big part of our challenge-

Jon Alterman:

What does that mean?

Jake Sullivan:

I'll come on to what I mean by that is the gap between our means and ends. So, our ends in Syria through that period were "Assad must go." We need a complete transition of government, but our means were basically some combination of marginal economic sanctions and various forms of support for the opposition--definitely not enough to cross the means-ends gap.

So, my view is if the United States had actually been prepared to potentially take very limited direct military action—for example, in response to the gassing—but not to produce regime change in Syria, but rather to produce progress at the bargaining table, I think the chances of a potentially positive outcome would have gone up. Maybe only a little bit, maybe it'd still be a complete mess. But I actually think if we had come off of "Assad must go" much earlier, while also putting more skin in the game earlier, it is possible that we could have produced a better outcome. That's essentially what the Bosnia model was. It was not, "Milošević must go from Belgrade." It was not an effort at regime change.

If we had come off of "Assad must go" much earlier, while also putting more skin in the game earlier, it is possible that we could have produced a better outcome.

Frankly, the Dayton Accord was, at the end of the day, a deeply imperfect, flawed agreement that to this day is having a hard time holding together, but it holds. We avoided a much worse catastrophe by linking some application of U.S. means to relatively modest diplomatic goals. Our problem in Syria is our diplomatic goal was the transformation of Syria. I think at the end of the day, that was probably a mistake.

Jon Alterman:

Part of the challenge of preventative diplomacy is that you don't get credit for things that people consider unlikely not happening. I think one of the challenges of a real diplomatic push in the region is not that you won't be covered in glory, because you're not going to have a peace agreement that's going to end centuries of conflict in the region. But there's a perception that because you haven't gotten peace agreements that everything is a failure, because people can't begin to imagine the things that you prevented. So, how do you get out of that trap that there's a sense that diplomats are always compromising and giving stuff up, and soldiers at least occasionally win?

Jake Sullivan:

Look, I guess my view on that is that's a matter of discipline. It's a matter of presidential leadership and other forms of leadership, basically saying, "I'm going for this even though it's not going to produce big-bang successes and even if we're going to get a lot of criticism from a lot of different angles, because fundamentally committing to this strategy over the course of time and sticking with this strategy presents a better chance of producing better outcomes than the alternative. Frankly, we've tried the other strategy for a really long time and in a lot of ways, so let's give this a real go."

The biggest problem the United States has, of course, right now is any kind of sustained strategy— any kind of sustained diplomatic initiative—is subject to the political calendar in the United States. My view is that if we really wanted to go all-in on a big diplomatic push, we're talking years. We're talking crossing presidential terms. So, that brings its own challenges given that you can have a change in president that results in really dramatic changes in policy, as we just saw with the change from Obama to Trump on Iran policy. I don't have a good answer to that other than to say that's not a reason not to try and hope, because I don't see an alternative that is going to be more successful.

Our problem in Syria is our diplomatic goal was the transformation of Syria. I think at the end of the day, that was probably a mistake.

Jon Alterman:

But it is an obstacle.

Jake Sullivan:

It's a big one.

Jon Alterman:

Is there any way to minimize the impact of it, do you think?

Jake Sullivan:

Some people argue with respect to the diplomacy around the JCPOA that if only we collectively in the Obama administration tried harder on bringing Congress along or gotten a treaty, we could have created a more durable framework for nuclear

diplomacy with Iran. It's true in the abstract, right? Bipartisan consensus on a foreign policy issue is better than not.

But given the politics of the moment and the difficulty of generating that, I'm not sure there is a really effective way to minimize it other than to work at it in Washington, even as we work at it in the region—to try to, from the beginning, buy Congress into the logic behind the initiative, build some bipartisan support behind it, and hope for the best. Whether or not that's ultimately going to be successful or not kind of depends on the good faith of all of the actors involved. At least when I watched some of the Iran debate unfold, I didn't see good faith necessarily persistently flowing.

Jon Alterman:

The Obama administration a couple times put out a QDDR, Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, similar to the sort of broad strategic planning the Defense Department does. As you think about the need to reinvigorate, to reinvest in diplomacy, do you think that exercise is necessarily useful or could be adapted in some way?

Jake Sullivan:

I do. I was there for the first QDDR. The fact that the Defense Department has been doing Quadrennial Defense Reviews for many, many years to organize the intersection of strategy, policy and budget, and this had never happened at the State Department or USAID is kind of crazy. I think it is a highly necessary undertaking that as a systematic matter—as almost built into the muscle memory of our diplomatic and development function—we are setting out an alignment of strategy and budget, strategy and resources, ends and means, in ways that have rigor and that can create longer-term frameworks for the kind of engagement that we need going forward. I think it will elevate diplomacy and development in the canon of U.S. foreign policy tools in helpful ways.

Jon Alterman:

Let me ask a diplomatic question to finish up. Russia in the Middle East seems very opportunistic and generally a spoiler. Is China a potential partner for the United States in the Middle East? Is it a spoiler? Is it irrelevant? How should the United States—as it thinks broadly about the world—think about Russia's sometimes bottom-feeding in the Middle East, but also China's growing role and the growing attention that China gets, both positive and negative?

We need to be totally unsentimental about how we deal with Russia and the Middle East and not think they're going to be our savior in any aspect, but also not think . . . that we can't engage with them on certain issues.

Jake Sullivan:

Starting with Russia, I think "opportunistic" is a great word, and I think "spoiler" is a great word. When you're dealing with an opportunistic spoiler, you just have to be opportunistic in where it can potentially align with your interests, and then you need to be pushed back where it doesn't. So, I think we need to be totally unsentimental about how we deal with Russia and the Middle East and not think they're going to be our savior in any respect, but also not think that just because they're a pretty wretched regime at this point with everything that they're doing vis-à-vis the

United States that we can't engage them on certain issues.

In fact, we worked closely with them in the context of the P5+1 to try to produce progress on the nuclear file. Russia was at moments a constructive actor, even if in the main, in the Middle East, it is anything but a constructive actor.

China is a harder one for me because, honestly, China's engagement on the JCPOA was weak and sort of directionless. It's not clear to me that they have a well-developed sense of how they can contribute effectively to the diplomacy in the region. I think they have a well-developed sense on the extractive industry side of how they can get energy and try to make sure they've got a secure, stable supply of oil and gas from the region. But I don't think that we should see China right now as being some kind of great constructive partner in dealing with the challenges in the region.

> ***I don't think that we should see China right now as being some kind of great constructive partner in dealing with the challenges in the region.***

I think we should put them basically in a similar box that we do with Russia, which is if there's a moment we could work with them and they could be helpful to us, great. There are going to be areas where we don't see eye to eye, let's push back. Let's not get ourselves into the view of saying, "You know what the next great move is here? Bring China more to the center of diplomacy in the Middle East." I don't think that would necessarily work to our long-term advantage.

Jon Alterman:

One of the advantages the Chinese do have is that there's a perception in the region that the Chinese are there for the long haul, and a perception the United States isn't there for the long haul. But the Chinese are on their way in and the United States is on its way out. Is it necessary to address that perception? If so, how do you address that perception?

Jake Sullivan:

For me, the biggest part of that is not about trying to convince the region anything about China. It's to convince them about the United States and to reject the notion of "We're out, we're leaving." In order to reject that notion, I think we have to break through the false binary that says, "Being in means being super militarily in; and if you're not militarily in, you're out." That is really ultimately the jumping off point for the *Foreign Affairs* article.

Jon Alterman:

What are the visible signs of U.S. commitment? People can see bases. People can see arms sales. People can see troops. Is it the secretary of state being constantly on the road? But even so, what's the metric by which people are going to be able to judge U.S. commitment in a more diplomatic centered world?

Jake Sullivan:

Well, just think about your last two questions. It's sort of interesting. In your previous question, you said the premise was that they see China as in. China doesn't have a base, at least not yet. China doesn't have a military presence in the region. Yet, they're not suffering from the same false binary that we are. Why is that? Because of economic relationships, capital, diplomacy, intelligence—all of the instruments of power

that a great power should have and should be able to apply.

> ***We have to break through the false binary that says, "Being in means being super militarily in; and if you're not militarily in, you're out."***

So, my view is that it is a multi-faceted approach the United States should be taking. I'm not arguing for getting out of every base in the Middle East. There is a military posture dimension to this as a reduced footprint, but it's all those other elements of power. It is our commercial and economic engagement. It is our intelligence relationships. It is our diplomacy. It is our development efforts to actually push for economic and political modernization and reform. That all collectively can come at a much lower fiscal cost than major American military deployments to the region, and actually produce better results on the ground.

Jon Alterman:

Jake, thank you very much for joining us today. Please read Jake's *Foreign Affairs* piece. Also, if you only caught part of the discussion today, the entire discussion will be put placed on the CSIS website. Thank you very much for joining us. Thanks, Jake.

Jake Sullivan:

Thank you.