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# THE DEMOCRATS' FOREIGN POLICY IN THE SHADOW OF TRUMP

TED REINERT



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## SUMMARY:

Despite the broad success of Barack Obama's presidency, America's Democratic Party finds itself debating the political path back to power amid the chaos of the Donald Trump administration, which has jumbled expectations for what a Republican foreign policy looks like. This paper examines where the Democrats might be headed on foreign policy — in opposition, for the coming 2020 presidential campaign, and for their eventual return to the White House in 2021 or later — focusing on the arguments of Congressional Democrats who might have a future in national politics.

Foreign policy did not play a major role in the 2016 primary campaign between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, and the *de facto* Democratic foreign policy may be a continuation of Obama's championing of the liberal international order mixed with pragmatic strategic restraint. Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy has articulated this "progressive foreign policy" direction most vocally. This Obamanian path competes with a somewhat more interventionist liberal hawk camp, including Clinton and her running mate Virginia Senator Tim Kaine, and a more critical left, which claimed victory over the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement during the primary and which includes Hawaii Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, a sharp critic of regime-change military interventions.

With Democrats more committed to multilateralism and diplomacy, particularly compared with Trump, America's liberal democratic allies and partners will welcome the return of the party to the White House, but the post-Trump clean-up job will be Herculean and will require the rebuilding of Washington's diplomatic apparatus itself. Congress is also playing an important role on foreign policy in the Trump era and Democrats must work with their colleagues across the aisle to mitigate Trump's damage. Democrats should sharpen their foreign policy skills and debates in search of solutions to prevent catastrophic wars and ameliorate international problems. This includes finding a proactive and sensible policy toward Russia, despite the politicization of all things Russian in the aftermath of the 2016 election. *A GMF policy paper on the Republicans' foreign policy is forthcoming.*

### **About the Author**

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Donald Trump has jumbled expectations for what a Republican foreign policy looks like. Where does this leave Democrats in terms of foreign policy? And what might that evolution mean for the world, both as an opposition foreign policy amid the sound and fury of Trump's presidency and once the Democrats return to the White House?

This paper examines the foreign policy arguments of up-and-coming leaders in the Democratic Party, focusing on elected politicians — mainly on Congressional Democrats serving on foreign-policy relevant committees — rather than the group of foreign and security policy officials and thinkers which Barack Obama's advisor Ben Rhodes memorably dubbed "the Blob." The paper focuses on both articulation of an overall foreign policy strategy and on a few notable areas, including Russia and the Middle East.

Rough directions are discernable. The *de facto* Democratic foreign policy might be a continuation of Obama's championing of the liberal international order mixed with pragmatic strategic restraint.<sup>1</sup> Obama's foreign policy was more popular at the time of his 2012 re-election than at the end of his presidency, with liberal hawks joining much of the Republican establishment in criticizing his decisions not to intervene more forcefully in Syria or arm Ukraine against Russia. A President Hillary Clinton likely would have been more interventionist than Obama, but to a limited degree, given the realities of public opinion. Broad skepticism toward the foreign policies Washington has pursued for decades thrives on the left — as well as on the Trumpian right — and Democratic politicians need to account for that. Obama's thinking included some of that skepticism,

1 Thomas J. Wright describes and critiques the "Obama doctrine of restraint" well: "Many Americans, feeling a heightened sense of risk and economic pressures at home, want to reduce the U.S. role in upholding the liberal order, even as they simultaneously want the benefits of that order. Consequently they are looking for ways of doing less in the world without causing a significant deterioration in it. The search for this middle path was, in many ways, the core mission of President Obama during his two terms in office." Thomas J. Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21st Century and the Future of American Power*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017, p. 171.

but while many Democrats were broadly supportive of his "middle path," plenty were more critical of his use of force and promotion of major free trade deals.

The Democrats did not lose the 2016 election because of foreign policy — according to exit polls Clinton easily won voters who prioritized that issue, although Trump won voters who prioritized immigration and terrorism. Coming elections are also unlikely to be decided on foreign policy grounds, which is rarely the top issue for American voters, absent war with North Korea, Iran, Russia, or China, or a major terrorist attack on U.S. soil. And foreign policy is not one of the fiercer debates within today's Democratic Party, though nuances matter.

However, if Democrats return to the White House in three years, they will need to be ready with good ideas and strategies to repair U.S. foreign policy — and the diplomatic apparatus itself — from Trump's damage.

It is worth emphasizing that the foreign policy of the Democrats for the next three years at least is an opposition foreign policy,

not the official foreign policy of the United States. Politicians not serving in the Executive Branch bear less responsibility for foreign policy. Members of Congress can bash Russia or China in colorful language, use the words "Armenian" and "genocide" together in a sentence, call for the United States to move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, or endorse Kurdish independence (as Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York has)<sup>2</sup> without destabilizing important bilateral relationships, a luxury traditionally unavailable to the President of the United States (though Trump has upended diplomatic norms with his tweets). However, Congress can certainly influence U.S. foreign policy through powers including legislation, appropriations, oversight, approval of appointees and treaties, and authorization to use military force. Most notably thus far in the Trump administration, Congress increased sanctions against Russia by a bipartisan veto-proof supermajority, essentially

2 Robin Wright, "Kurds Voted. So Is the Middle East Breaking Up?" *The New Yorker*, September 27, 2017.

tying the hands of a president it did not trust on Russia policy, as part of a package with Iran and North Korea sanctions.

This paper explores the Democrats' foreign policy in four sections. The first will look at the political conditions of the post-Obama Democratic Party and recent Democratic foreign policy legacy. The second will highlight the voices on foreign policy of a few rising Democratic leaders in the Congress. The third section will look at commonalities and divides within the Democrats on foreign policy issues including trade, diplomatic and defense spending, the use of force, the promotion of democracy and human rights, and Middle East policy. Lastly, the fourth will consider the tricky and politically charged question of Russia policy after the 2016 election.

## The State of the Democratic Party and Its Foreign Policy Legacy

The Democratic Party is in a difficult place. While Democrats won the popular vote in six of the past seven presidential elections, two of these “wins” yielded electoral defeats thanks to the Electoral College and the quirks of U.S. political geography. Barack Obama was a successful, effective, and fairly popular president, but the Democrats now hold neither house of Congress and historically few governor's mansions and state legislatures. The political map makes their path back to the White House or control of either house of Congress more challenging than national polls suggest.

The 2016 presidential primary was bitter. Unlike the GOP race, there were few serious candidates — the seeming inevitability of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton kept many potential rivals on the sidelines, while Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, a left-wing independent, collected the vote of those discontented with Clinton and the party establishment. Sanders ran a great campaign and exceeded expectations, but never posed as serious a threat to Clinton's eventual victory as his enthusiastic fans and media coverage might indicate — the race was not nearly as close as Obama and Clinton's in 2008. Clinton ran on a progressive platform, but had

trouble gaining the trust of many progressive voters. Though a good soldier during the general election, Sanders remains engaged in a battle for the soul and policies of the Democratic Party.

With fervent opposition to Trump's presidency among their supporters and unresolved questions of how and where to find the voters to return the party to power, the Democrats are in a similar dilemma to the Republican Party of 2009, which faced an even weaker position in Congress. The successes and failures of the “Tea Party”-infused Republican Party offers mixed signals — while the nomination of fringe or very socially conservative figures cost the GOP some eminently winnable Senate races in 2010 (Delaware, Nevada) and 2012 (Indiana, Missouri) and the hard-right trend of the party hurt Mitt Romney's chances to win moderates in 2012, the GOP has dominated the House of Representatives and thwarted much of Obama's legislative agenda.<sup>3</sup>

Sanders, along with Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, leads a strengthened (if not yet dominant) and economically populist left wing of the Democratic Party. He argues Democrats can “stop losing elections” by embracing a more aggressive progressive economic agenda, pointing to the surprise electoral gains and strong youth turnout for Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in the United Kingdom's June 2017 election as well as enthusiasm for his own movement.<sup>4</sup> “The Democrats must develop an agenda that speaks to the pain of tens of millions of families who are working longer hours for lower wages and to the young people who, unless we turn the economy around, will have a lower standard of living than their parents,” Sanders writes.

<sup>3</sup> For a good analysis of the development of the Republican Party into a harder-right political force before the rise of Trump and its implications for the functioning of the U.S. political system, see Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism*, New York: Basic Books, 2012. The authors write that “One of the two major parties, the Republican Party, has become an insurgent outlier — ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts; evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition. When one party moves this far from the center of U.S. politics, it is extremely difficult to enact policies responsive to the country's most pressing challenges.” A risk of the present moment is that a left-wing mirror of the Tea Party would increase the dysfunction of the U.S. political system further, making it even more difficult for Washington to govern domestically and to be a coherent actor on the world stage.

<sup>4</sup> Bernie Sanders, “Bernie Sanders: How Democrats Can Stop Losing Elections,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2017.



Focused on improving living standards for Americans at home, Sanders and Warren have had less to say about the U.S. role in the world. The left did persuade Clinton to drop her support for the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal negotiated by the Obama administration, a strategic priority for U.S. influence in Asia as a standards-setting counter to an increasingly powerful China. While Sanders recognized Clinton's superior foreign policy experience, he questioned her judgment and enthusiasm for "regime change." Still, foreign policy was not a defining issue in the primary, and was a net asset for Clinton, whose experience as Secretary of State as well as in the Senate and her husband's White House made her arguably the most qualified presidential candidate in U.S. history.

Earlier this year, Katrina vanden Heuvel, the editor of the left-wing magazine *The Nation*, asked "where is the Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren of foreign policy?" arguing that "the Democratic establishment's record on foreign policy has been disastrous" — that "polic[ing] the world" and interventionism have mired the United States in endless wars, undermined international law, increased tensions with Russia and China, and consumed resources better used at home, and that globalization has devastated American workers.<sup>5</sup> This represents a longstanding critique of U.S. foreign policy from the left — and overlaps to a degree with Trump's own "America First" vision for U.S. foreign policy, which stressed an end to nation-building, finding common ground with Russia and China, and "no longer surrender[ing] ... to the false song of globalism."<sup>6</sup>

Politically, Vanden Heuvel's question remains unanswered. No Democrat has caught fire politically via a strong critique of U.S. foreign policy in the past decade. The last to win a presidential nomination

in large part due to dissatisfaction with the party establishment's foreign policy record was Obama himself.

To the Democrats' credit, in the post-Cold War era, the Clinton and Obama administrations were far more successful managers of foreign policy than the more unilateralist George W. Bush and Trump administrations. Bush was responsible for the singular catastrophe of U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War period, the Iraq War, while Trump is wrecking the liberal international order despite the best efforts of competent advisors. Both have been highly unpopular with America's liberal democratic allies.<sup>7</sup> There is plenty to both criticize and praise in the records of each of Trump's three immediate predecessors. Clinton's expansions of globalization and NATO have their discontents, while Obama presided over a period of relative decline in U.S. global power amid rising disorder and illiberal trends. However, while a significantly more isolationist

**“ While a significantly more isolationist approach than Obama’s may have supporters in both parties, it remains unrealistic in a hyperconnected age.”**

approach than Obama's — or frankly, any president since Herbert Hoover's — may have supporters in both parties, it remains unrealistic in a hyperconnected age. In a belated foreign policy address in September 2017, Sanders himself endorsed U.S. power and values-based leadership in striking terms ("In the struggle of democracy versus authoritarianism, we intend to

win ... As the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth, we have got to help lead the struggle to defend and expand a rules-based international order, in which law, not might, makes right."), although his list of U.S. failures was longer than his list of U.S. successes.<sup>8</sup>

5 Katrina vanden Heuvel, "Where is the Elizabeth Warren of Foreign Policy?" *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2017.

6 Donald J. Trump, "Trump on Foreign Policy," Center for the National Interest, April 27, 2016.

7 German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland notably spoke of not being able to rely on the United States following Trump's first foreign trip in May. Michael Birnbaum and Rick Noack, "Following Trump's Trip, Merkel Says Europe Can't Rely on 'Others.' She Means the U.S.," *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2017; Chrystia Freeland, "Address by Minister Freeland on Canada's Foreign Policy Priorities," Government of Canada, June 6, 2017.

8 See Ted Reinert, "Could Bernie Save the Liberal Order?" *Out of Order*, September 28, 2017; Bernie Sanders, "Read: Bernie Sanders' Big Foreign Policy Speech," *Vox*, September 21, 2017.

Global connectivity has cons as well as pros and losers as well as winners, and the benefits of liberal international order, free trade, and immigration are challenging to sell, especially to the rural white voters who delivered Trump the election — and who supported Sanders in the primaries.<sup>9</sup> With Trump's Republican Party far less an advocate for values-based U.S. global leadership than George W. Bush's, internationalist Democrats pinched from both sides will need to improve their salesmanship and economic outcomes for the left-behind areas of the country to sustain a globally open economy.

Obama's strategic restraint — not weakness or isolationism but the expression of a considered worldview and a “long game” strategy<sup>10</sup> — and Hillary Clinton's more hawkish approach to wielding U.S. power both fall within a broad mainstream of Democratic foreign policy, which is closer to that of their counterparts across the aisle than the two parties are on most issues. That mainstream Democratic foreign policy embraces “smart power” pairing defense with diplomatic and development efforts, favors multilateralism, and is somewhat more skeptical of military intervention than mainstream GOP foreign policy (if not necessarily Trump or today's GOP base). Along with the Clintonian and Obamanian trends on the right and the left of the Democratic foreign policy mainstream, a more isolationist left trend — critical of Obama's foreign policy on issues such as free trade, military interventions like Libya, tensions with Russia and China, and targeted killings of terrorists by drones — is another significant force.

Today, the Democrats' first concern is playing defense by thwarting the Republican agenda, but after Election Day 2018 — barely a year away — the next overly-long presidential election in the United States will begin in earnest and the Democrats will have to offer prospective presidents and positive policy solutions. Sanders, Warren, and former Vice President Joe Biden lead a huge pack of potential candidates, but all three will be in their 70s by

<sup>9</sup> See the county-by-county maps of the general election and primary: Jim Tankersley, “Donald Trump Lost Most of the American Economy in this Election,” *The Washington Post*, November 22, 2017; *The New York Times*, “Detailed Maps of Where Trump, Cruz, Clinton and Sanders Have Won,” updated October 4, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> For a compelling and detailed defense of Obama's foreign policy, which is beyond the scope of this paper, see Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World*, New York: Public Affairs, 2016.

November 2020, as will Hillary Clinton, and their candidacies would face considerable reluctance from many voters who prefer different policies or younger, fresher leadership. The next section will focus on prominent voices on foreign policy among younger leaders in the Congress who could well run for president in 2020 or later.

## Democratic Voices on Foreign Policy

With Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, and former Secretary of State John Kerry at or nearing the end of their careers at the highest levels of politics, the Democrats are in need of a new generation of leaders with foreign policy experience. Such a cadre is developing in Congress.

High-profile senators Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Cory Booker of New Jersey joined the Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees respectively after the November election, potentially burnishing their resumes for future presidential campaigns. Virginia Senator Tim Kaine, Clinton's running mate, is one of two Democrats (along with New Hampshire's Jeanne Shaheen) serving on both of these key committees, which helped him get on the 2016 ticket. California Senator Kamala Harris, the state's former attorney general and the star of the newly-elected class of Democrats, got a seat on the Intelligence Committee and made headlines for tough questioning at hearings related to Russia's interference in last year's election. Warren and Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar joined GOP foreign policy grandees John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina on trips to Afghanistan and eastern Europe, respectively.

The closest thing the Democrats have to a foreign policy spokesperson, however, may be the youngest Democrat in the Senate, Connecticut's **Chris Murphy**, elected in 2012 after three terms in the House. Murphy, who serves on the Foreign Relations Committee and is the Ranking Member on the Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security

Cooperation, has made foreign policy a signature issue and is media savvy including on the President's favored medium of Twitter.<sup>11</sup>

Murphy's positioning is more or less Obamanian, pragmatically balanced between the party's more centrist foreign policy establishment and the critical left. In 2015, he outlined eight "principles for a progressive foreign policy" in an article for *Foreign Affairs* with fellow senators Brian Schatz of Hawaii and Martin Heinrich of New Mexico.<sup>12</sup> This basically amounts to Obama's "middle of the left" approach without the inevitable disappointments and controversies of his record in power. Asked in May to describe the "Democratic vision" on foreign policy after Obama, Murphy argued, "It's an America that is forward deployed in the world with an acknowledgment that the blunt force of military power cannot adequately protect us given the fact that the threats posed to us today are largely not conventional military threats ... Unless you are adequately resourced to help make ungovernable spaces in the world more governable ... Unless you invest in true energy independence for countries that sit on Russia's periphery that want to get off Russia's oil, unless you invest in real anti-propaganda efforts to push back against the Russians or the extremist groups, unless you do real anti-corruption work to recognize that corruption breeds instability, which breeds extremism, then you're not protecting America."<sup>13</sup> When the interviewer responded that this sounded like what Senator Obama might have said a decade prior, Murphy replied that President Obama lacked the non-military toolkit he needed to move away from a militarized foreign policy. Murphy called for a 90 percent increase over five years in the State Department, Foreign Operations, and Related Agencies budget in a lengthy report released by his office in April, while the Trump administration proposed cutting the same budget by 30 percent in this year alone, to bipartisan opposition. The

11 Notably, Murphy responded to Trump's immigration order banning Syrian refugees from entering the United States on January 27 with a photo of drowned three-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi and the note "To my colleagues: don't ever again lecture me on American moral leadership if you chose to be silent today," and to the news of Trump's inviting Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte to the White House on April 30 with "We are watching in real time as the American human rights bully pulpit disintegrates into ash." <https://twitter.com/ChrisMurphyCT/status/825173776681807872>; <https://twitter.com/chrismurphyct/status/858638288789413888>.

12 Chris Murphy, Brian Schatz, and Martin Heinrich, "Principles for a Progressive Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, June 8, 2015.

13 Susan Glasser, "Sen. Chris Murphy: The Full Transcript," *The Global Politico*, May 8, 2017.

Connecticut senator has repeatedly advocated for "a 21st Century Marshall Plan" to counter extremism and armed conflict with economic empowerment and democracy assistance.<sup>14</sup>

Another hallmark of Murphy's foreign policy rhetoric, similar to Obama's, is skepticism about Washington's Middle East policies and particularly interventions. He argued that the Obama administration "should never have taken sides in the Syrian civil war" and that its "halfway support" for the rebels fighting the government of President Bashar al-Assad doomed them. "Even after Iraq, American foreign policy and military elites still cling to the notion that military intervention can bring political stability, somehow to the Middle East," he wrote in *The New York Times* in January. "This is a fallacy. Restraint in the face of evil is hard stuff, but hubris in the face of evil is worse."<sup>15</sup> On Libya, Murphy argues that "because we didn't have the conversation about the political after-effects, we ended up creating chaos on the ground that has arguably killed more civilians than were at risk when we launched the bombing campaign."<sup>16</sup> He sees the Sisi government in Egypt "creating more radicals than they are eliminating" through its human rights abuses, which "ultimately presents a threat to the U.S. homeland," and argues that the United States should not provide Cairo with "no strings attached" aid.<sup>17</sup> And he is sharply critical of "largely unconditional" U.S. support for Saudi Arabia given that Riyadh's human rights record "is amongst the worst in the world" and that its "support for a very intolerant version of Islam is one of the reasons why we have such a big extremism problem on our hands." He is particularly damning of U.S. support for the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen.<sup>18</sup>

As a member of both the Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees since joining the Senate in 2013, **Tim Kaine** of Virginia has also been vocal on foreign policy issues. If Joe Lieberman and John Edwards' campaigns after narrowly losing the vice presidency are an indication, Kaine might yet

14 Chris Murphy, "Rethinking the Battlefield," <https://www.murphy.senate.gov/rethinking-the-battlefield>; Council on Foreign Relations, "U.S. Security Amid Budget Cuts: A Conversation with Senator Chris Murphy," April 10, 2017.

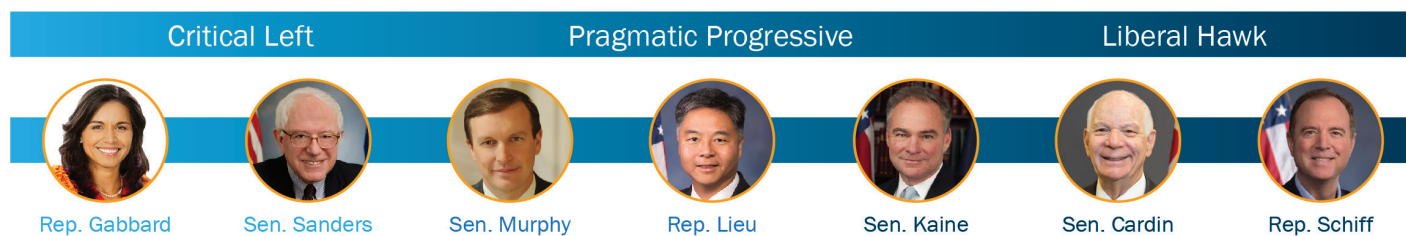
15 Chris Murphy, "Marshall Plans, Not Martial Plans," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2017.

16 Eric Levitz, "Progressives Need a New Foreign Policy Vision. This Democratic Senator Says He Has One." *New York*, May 7, 2017.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

# The Democratic Foreign Policy Spectrum



run for president in his own right. Unlike Murphy, Kaine is somewhat more hawkish than Obama and closer to Hillary Clinton on foreign policy — as his advocacy for greater U.S. intervention in Syria has made clear. In a recent *Foreign Affairs* article calling for a “new Truman doctrine ... a reinvigorated campaign to peacefully and forcefully promote the virtues of democracy over authoritarianism and extremism,” Kaine faulted Obama’s “suspicion of grand strategy,” “unwillingness to forcefully intervene early in the Syrian civil war,” and “lackadaisical response to Russia’s cyberattacks and its unprecedented interference in the 2016 election,” writing, “sometimes not doing stupid stuff became an excuse for not doing stuff it was stupid not to do.”<sup>19</sup>

Part of Kaine’s case for making positive change in the world starts at home with the United States striving to position itself as the world’s exemplary democracy. “Doing so would be the best way to advance the needs of American citizens and make the most persuasive case for the virtues of democracy over authoritarianism and extremism,” he argues. Kaine notes that much work remains to be done toward this goal, given “persistent regional and racial gaps in economic success, abysmal record electing women to federal office, and shockingly low voter-turnout rates,” but he understates America’s democratic shortcomings. Given its size and power, the United States is difficult to replace as “leader of the free world,” can do more to support democracies around the globe, and must strengthen its democratic governance, as Kaine suggests. However, America becoming one of the world’s highest-quality democracies anytime soon is unrealistic, given its scorched-earth partisan warfare, election of a vulgar

nationalist with an admiration for strongmen to the presidency — which the world will not forget — and structural problems and trends.<sup>20</sup>

Kaine also stresses that the United States should increase its focus on the Americas, where China has increased its presence. “Given the budget constraints that have made it difficult to project power globally ... Washington should consider how much more it could do by increasing investment closer to home,” he wrote. A U.S. foreign policy that looks to partner more with Mexico and the rest of Latin America rather than build walls would build on one of Obama’s signature foreign policy accomplishments, the opening to Cuba, refute Trumpism, and appeal to the growing Latino population in the United States.

<sup>20</sup> In Freedom House’s latest “Freedom in the World” report, the United States scores lower than more than 40 countries for political rights and civil liberties, with a rating of 89 out of 100, compared to 99 for Canada, 95 each for Germany and the United Kingdom, and 90 for France. Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2017: Table of Country Scores.” Robert Mickey, Steven Levitsky, and Lucan Ahmad Way note in another recent *Foreign Affairs* article that “it was only in the early 1970s — once the civil rights movement and the federal government managed to stamp out authoritarianism in southern states — that the country truly became democratic,” but “this process also helped divide Congress, realigning voters along racial lines and pushing the Republican Party further to the right.” They predict “the Trump presidency could push the United States into a mild form of what we call ‘competitive authoritarianism’ — a system in which meaningful democratic institutions exist yet the government abuses state power to disadvantage its opponents.” Robert Mickey, Steven Levitsky, and Lucan Ahmad Way, “Is America Still Safe for Democracy?” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2017. Many Republican politicians, particularly on the state level, have worked in recent years to make it harder for predominantly Democratic groups to vote, for example by reducing opportunities for early voting. Trump’s voter fraud commission, led by Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, is at the vanguard of these efforts. See *The Washington Post*, “Voter Suppression is the Civil Rights Issue of this Era,” August 19, 2017. The more recent developments of our hyperpartisan era build upon the indirect election of the president via the Electoral College, the heavy small state bias of the U.S. Senate, a long history of gerrymandering legislative districts, and the lack of voting Congressional representation for the 680,000 residents of the nation’s capital, which is predominantly Democratic and majority nonwhite (not to mention the 4 million Americans in Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories). See Michelle Goldberg, “Tyranny of the Minority,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Tim Kaine, “A New Truman Doctrine: Grand Strategy in a Hyperconnected World,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2017.



Kaine has pushed Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) legislation with Arizona Republican Jeff Flake for several years, to better define the constitutional basis for the U.S. mission against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS), al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. As he notes, U.S. wars and military actions in the wider Middle East have had the legal basis of an AUMF passed in the days after the September 11 attacks, before most current members of Congress were elected, and stretched far beyond its original intent. “We

owe it to the American public to define the scope of the U.S. mission against terrorist organizations, including ISIS, and we owe it to our troops to show we’re behind them in their mission,” Kaine argues.<sup>21</sup> This laudable effort has gotten little traction, however.

Another vocal standout on foreign policy, from the critical left, is Hawaii’s **Tulsi Gabbard**, the youngest House Democrat, first elected in 2012 and serving on both the Foreign Affairs and Armed Services Committees. An Iraq War veteran and the first Hindu Member of Congress, Gabbard resigned from the position of vice-chair of the Democratic National Committee to endorse Sanders, and is a fellow with the Sanders Institute, a Burlington, Vermont-based progressive think tank founded by Bernie’s wife Jane O’Meara Sanders — the only Member of Congress accorded that honor. Gabbard has been outspoken against U.S. regime-change military interventions, including the limited support for Syrian rebels, while supporting action against ISIS. Her criticism of Obama for his reluctance to call the terrorist group “Islamic” — matching a GOP talking point — made her relatively popular among Republicans last year.<sup>22</sup>

“ ***U.S. military actions in the wider Middle East have had the legal basis of an AUMF passed before most current members of Congress were elected, and stretched far beyond its original intent.*** ”

In January, not long after meeting with Trump, who may have considered her for the position of ambassador to the United Nations,<sup>23</sup> Gabbard traveled to Damascus to meet with Assad. “We’ve got

to be able to meet anyone that we need to if there is a possibility that we could achieve peace,” she said of the trip. In April, Gabbard expressed skepticism that the Syrian government had been responsible for a chemical weapons attack and criticized Trump’s decision to launch missile strikes in response, arguing “this escalation is short-sighted and will

lead to more dead civilians, more refugees, the strengthening of al-Qaeda and other terrorists, and a possible nuclear war between the United States and Russia.”<sup>24</sup> Gabbard’s signature legislation, entitled the Stop Arming Terrorists Act, would prevent federal agencies from providing weapons, cash, or intelligence to terrorists groups and has support on the libertarian right as well as the left, with Kentucky Republican Rand Paul introducing the bill in the Senate.<sup>25</sup>

Gabbard has also been outspoken on North Korea and urges direct negotiations to deal with Pyongyang’s nuclear program. She argues that Kim Jong-un and Kim Jong-il’s “actions have not taken place in a vacuum” as they have “learned lessons” from U.S. regime-change operations in Iraq and Libya. “Every time the U.S. embarks on a new war to ‘rid the world of a monster,’ it deepens the resolve of other ‘monsters’ who believe the only way to protect themselves from our penchant for regime change wars is to have nuclear weapons as a deterrent,” she writes.<sup>26</sup> Following North Korea’s intercontinental ballistic missile test in early July, Gabbard stated, “Serious diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula will require an end to our regime change

21 Tim Kaine, “Flake, Kaine Introduce Authorization For Use of Military Force Against ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Taliban,” May 25, 2017, <https://www.kaine.senate.gov/press-releases/flake-kaine-introduce-authorization-for-use-of-military-force-against-isis-al-qaeda-taliban>.

22 Krishnadev Calamur, “The GOP’s Favorite Democrat Goes to Syria,” *The Atlantic*, January 18, 2017.

23 Ibid.

24 Elise Viebeck, “What is Tulsi Gabbard Thinking on Syria,” *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2017.

25 Tulsi Gabbard, “Gabbard’s Stop Arming Terrorists Act Introduced in Senate,” March 10, 2017, <https://gabbard.house.gov/news/press-releases/gabbards-stop-arming-terrorists-act-introduced-senate>.

26 Tulsi Gabbard, “U.S. Record of Regime Change Hurts NK Diplomacy,” *The Hill*, May 24, 2017.

war in Syria and a public statement that the U.S. will not engage in regime change wars and nation-building overseas, including in Iran and North Korea. We should focus our limited resources on rebuilding our own country and seriously commit ourselves to de-escalating this dangerous stand-off with North Korea and negotiate a peaceful diplomatic solution.”<sup>27</sup>

Gabbard’s political ascendancy would challenge the Democratic status quo on foreign policy, and an Iraq-level-or-worse foreign policy disaster under Trump or a successor could assist her rise as a national-level politician.

These three Democrats represent the broad debate well, but others of younger generations, including veterans like Senator Tammy Duckworth of Illinois, Congressman Ted Lieu of California, and Congressman Seth Moulton of Massachusetts<sup>28</sup> also bear watching as rising leaders on foreign and security policy issues.

## Intra-Party Consensuses and Tensions on Foreign Policy

Within the range of foreign policy prescriptions by vocal Democratic leaders, a standout consensus is the importance of devoting more resources to American diplomacy and other non-military foreign policy tools including development aid. The party also remains rhetorically devoted to multilateralism and to good relations with Washington’s treaty allies in Europe and Asia — an approach that helps explain why Obama and Bill Clinton’s approval ratings in these countries tended to be significantly higher than Trump and George W. Bush’s.

An unusually hawkish moment on Russia aside, the Democratic Party, its voters, and the wider American left are divided on some key foreign policy issues,

27 Tulsi Gabbard, “Rep. Tulsi Gabbard Statement on North Korea’s Intercontinental Ballistic Missile Test,” July 5, 2017, <https://gabbard.house.gov/news/press-releases/rep-tulsi-gabbard-statement-north-korea-s-intercontinental-ballistic-missile>.

28 Moulton is a co-chair of the Democratic Caucus National Security Task Force, launched in June to find solutions and bolster Democratic positioning on national security challenges. Seth Moulton, “Moulton, House Democrats Launch National Security Task Force,” June 13, 2017, <https://moulton.house.gov/legislative-center/moulton-house-democrats-launch-national-security-task-force/>.

though Obama’s overall popularity limited the infighting while he was in office. Murphy argues “the relative dormancy” in the party on foreign policy was “a natural extension of having a president be in power that the grassroots largely believed in, when it came to foreign affairs.”<sup>29</sup> However, no one beyond Obama has that level of charisma and trust across the party and base, and a contentious and wide-open 2020 primary will expose those divisions. The party should benefit from healthy debates on trade, conditions for the use of military force, military spending, the tools of the fight against terrorism, the role of promoting democracy and protecting human rights in U.S. foreign policy, Middle East policy, and how to deal with challenges to liberal international order from Russia and China. A Democratic successor to President Trump will have a Herculean clean-up job to do, and will need to have a considered foreign policy strategy for dealing with the post-Trump world.

## Trade

Trade, where the left notched its major foreign policy victory of the 2016 primary, has long divided the party establishment and many of its voters. Opposition to free trade has been stronger in the Democratic Party than the Republican Party; Bill Clinton and Obama relied on Republican votes to pass the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and free trade agreements with Colombia, Panama, and South Korea, and Obama failed to ratify TPP before leaving office. However, Trump describes deals including NAFTA, the South Korea FTA, and TPP as unfair to the United States, dumped TPP and claims he will renegotiate the others, and rhetorically champions bilateral trade deals with countries like the United Kingdom. Further progress by the Trump administration on increasing trade protectionism could likely find significant support within the Democratic Party along with significant opposition within the Republican Party, leading to coalitions of strange bedfellows.

Absent government doing a better job at reducing inequality and compensating the country’s losers from economic change, be it driven by trade,

29 Levitz.

automation, or other factors, support for free trade will increasingly be a liability for Democratic politicians.

## *Use of Force, the Role of Congress, and Military Spending*

Democrats frequently disagree on the appropriate conditions for the use of force, as we have seen above, and it is safe to say the Democratic base is more skeptical of military intervention than the party's foreign policy establishment.

Concern about the militarization of U.S. foreign policy is widespread. This is highly relevant given the Trump administration's deliberate weakening of the State Department via understaffing key positions and deep proposed budget cuts,<sup>30</sup> increased delegation of responsibility for foreign policy decision-making to the Pentagon, and proclivity for appointing generals to civilian positions, although the trend long predates Trump.<sup>31</sup>

Civilian control of the military is a related topic. The degree of Trump's delegation of decision-making is worrisome, even if one might trust military officials more than this particular commander-in-chief. Trump's nomination of General James Mattis as secretary of defense, which required a Congressional waiver given how recently he had retired, elicited some concern despite wide esteem for Mattis;<sup>32</sup> New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand voted against the waiver and nomination on these grounds.

The size of the defense budget is also a matter of debate. Murphy, for example, supports increased defense spending, though not "at the expense of the

State Department or domestic accounts."<sup>33</sup> Balance between defense and non-defense spending is a Democratic priority, which shaped the sequestration cuts divided between the two categories that resulted from the partisan debt-ceiling showdown in 2011. Sanders stressed the guns vs. butter problem in his foreign policy speech, quoting Dwight Eisenhower in his September foreign policy speech as he called for "broaden[ing] our understanding of what foreign policy is."<sup>34</sup> The Congressional Progressive Caucus, composed of 75 House members plus Sanders, emphasizes "sustainable baseline defense spending" and an end to emergency funding for Overseas Contingency Operations along with increased funding for refugee resettlement, diplomacy, and strategic humanitarian aid in its 2017 "People's Budget."<sup>35</sup>

Obama's last-minute decision to ask Congress for authorization to bomb Syria in August 2013, thus

responding to Damascus's crossing his "red line" by using chemical weapons against its citizens, has been widely criticized by pundits. However, the impulse to demand the backing of the elected representatives of the American people for use of force — which might limit that use of force,

given Congressional reticence to take tough votes supporting military actions — is very healthy. Obama owed his presidency to Hillary Clinton's vote in favor of the mistaken Iraq War in 2003, for which the Democratic primary electorate held her accountable.

Trump's unfitnes to control U.S. nuclear weapons was a theme of the Clinton campaign. In January, Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts and Congressman Ted Lieu of California introduced legislation which would prevent the president from initiating a first-use nuclear strike without a Congressional declaration of war expressly

**“ The impulse to demand the backing of the elected representatives of the American people for use of force is very healthy.”**

30 See Julia Ioffe, "The State of Trump's State Department," *The Atlantic*, March 1, 2017; Roger Cohen, "The Desperation of Our Diplomats," *The New York Times*, July 28, 2017; Jason Zengerle, "Rex Tillerson and the Unraveling of the State Department," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2017.

31 See Rachel Maddow, *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power*, New York: Broadway, 2012.

32 Erin Simpson, "I Love Mattis But I Don't Love Him As SecDef," *War On the Rocks*, November 25, 2016; Alice Hunt Friend, "Mattis is Outstanding, So What's the Problem?" *War On the Rocks*, December 7, 2016.

33 See Council on Foreign Relations, "U.S. Security Amid Budget Cuts: A Conversation with Senator Chris Murphy."

34 Sanders, "Read: Bernie Sanders' Big Foreign Policy Speech."

35 Congressional Progressive Caucus, "The People's Budget: A Roadmap for the Resistance FY 2018," <https://cpc-grjalva.house.gov/the-peoples-budget-a-roadmap-for-the-resistance-fy-2018/>.

authorizing one. Co-sponsors include Sanders, Gabbard, and one Republican, Congressman Walter Jones of North Carolina, and the effort has been supported by arms control organizations,<sup>36</sup> but it has little chance of becoming law.

Along with military intervention broadly, the tools of the U.S. “war on terror” — including mass surveillance, drone strikes, indefinite detention, and, for a time in the Bush administration, torture — have been widely criticized on the left as well as on the libertarian right. Obama made changes to the prosecution of the campaign against terrorism, expanding the drone program, including against American citizens, and relying more on covert action by the CIA and special forces as an alternative to expensive wars and occupation — which “lowered the bar for waging war” and made it “easier for the United States to carry out killing operations at the ends of the earth than at any other time in its history.”<sup>37</sup> The law professor-turned-president publically wrestled with finding the right balance between security and rights, and was unable to fulfill his campaign promise to empty the prison at Guantánamo Bay thanks to Congressional opposition.

Trump’s more hawkish rhetoric and decisions as commander-in-chief will be viewed with skepticism and hostility by parts of the Democratic base. The sharpest partisan divides on a potential conflict would likely be on Iran, where the Obama administration’s multilateral diplomacy yielded a non-proliferation success but did not address other U.S. grievances about Iranian foreign policy. If Trump follows Iran hawks to a catastrophic war of

choice with Tehran — and his decertification of the Iran deal in October was a significant step towards this<sup>38</sup> — he should have little Democratic support.

## *Democracy, Human Rights, and Middle East Policy*

The promotion of democracy and human rights as a vital element of U.S. foreign policy has champions and opponents in both parties, given its occasional conflicts with strategic interests vis-à-vis authoritarian partners like China or Saudi Arabia and its association with military interventions which have had unforeseen consequences and high strategic, fiscal, and human costs. Obama himself regards failing to plan better for Libya’s aftermath as the greatest mistake of his presidency, although he defends the humanitarian intervention itself.<sup>39</sup> Gabbard takes a notably stability-focused approach, but

Obama-style strategic restraint with rhetorical and programmatic support for democracy and rights is likely to remain the dominant policy of the Democrats.

Policy toward the greater Middle East and relations with less-than-democratic non-treaty allies and security partners in the region is a related issue. Here, the partnership with Saudi Arabia is a perennial concern with critics across the political spectrum — one highlighted by Trump’s choice of Riyadh for his first trip abroad as president and the warm welcome he received there. Murphy teamed up with Rand Paul and Minnesota’s Al Franken to lead a bipartisan effort to block U.S. arms sales to Riyadh over massive civilian casualties in the Saudi-led war against Houthi rebels in Yemen, losing a vote narrowly in June.<sup>40</sup> Sanders meanwhile voted against the Senate’s package of Russia and Iran sanctions because of opposition to the Iran

**“ Trump’s more hawkish rhetoric and decisions as commander-in-chief will be viewed with skepticism and hostility by parts of the Democratic base.”**

36 Ted Lieu, “Congressman Lieu, Senator Markey Introduce the Restricting First Use of Nuclear Weapons Act of 2017,” January 24, 2017, <https://lieu.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/congressman-lieu-senator-markey-introduce-restricting-first-use-0>.

37 See Mark Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife: The CIA, A Secret Army, and A War At the Ends of the Earth*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2013; quote from prologue.

38 Zach Beauchamp, “What Trump’s Decision to ‘Decertify’ the Iran Nuclear Deal Actually Does,” Vox, October 13, 2017.

39 BBC, “President Obama: Libya Aftermath ‘Worst Mistake’ of Presidency,” April 11, 2016.

40 Paul McLeary, “Saudi Arms Sales Clears Contentious Senate Vote,” Foreign Policy, June 13, 2017, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sanders-statement-on-iran-and-russia-sanctions>.



sanctions, which he argued could endanger the nuclear agreement, a risk not worth taking “at a time of heightened tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its allies ... The United States must play a more even-handed role in the Middle East, and find ways to address not only Iran’s activities, but also Saudi Arabia’s decades-long support for radical extremism.”<sup>41</sup>

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the source of another fault line within the Democratic Party. The party establishment has strongly supported Israel for decades, but some Democratic voters and politicians have grown more critical as policies including settlement expansion in the West Bank have made it harder to resolve the conflict and create a viable Palestinian state, while Israel’s operations against Hamas-ruled Gaza in 2008–2009 and 2014 produced massive civilian casualties. The Obama administration and Benjamin Netanyahu government were frequently at odds; Netanyahu supported Romney fairly openly in 2012 and three years later arranged with the Congressional Republican leadership a speech to a joint session of Congress to denounce Obama’s Iran nuclear deal, a top administration priority. Israeli opposition helped sway key Senate Democrats including Schumer, Ben Cardin of Maryland, the Ranking Member of the Foreign Relations Committee, and Robert Menendez of New Jersey, the former Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, to vote with the Republicans against the deal — although Netanyahu’s heavy-handedness may well have helped sway other Democrats to vote with the President. In an April 2016 debate in Brooklyn ahead of the New York primary, Sanders argued that Israel’s operation in Gaza in 2014 was a “disproportionate” response and that Hillary Clinton has not stood up for Palestinian rights.<sup>42</sup> In July 2016, Sanders’ delegates failed to get language in the party platform changed to mention Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory or remove a condemnation of the controversial Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) movement.<sup>43</sup> During his 2016–2017 campaign to chair the Democratic National Committee, Sanders-backed Congressman Keith Ellison of Minnesota, the only

Muslim Member of Congress and the then-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, was attacked as anti-Israel; Ellison ultimately lost to Tom Perez, Obama’s former Labor Secretary and backed by the party establishment, but became Perez’s deputy.

## Russia Fever

Dealing with Russia’s aggression and armed interventions in eastern Europe and the Middle East and managing a dangerous great power relationship are classic foreign policy challenges. But Russia’s interference in the U.S. election has made policy toward Moscow intensely political. To put it bluntly, the Democrats will not forgive Russia for helping elect Donald Trump president.<sup>44</sup> Yet the attack on U.S. democracy — described by Connecticut Senator Richard Blumenthal as an “act of war” — compels a punitive response which must be bipartisan and intelligent. Democrats should understand that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s primary goal in interfering with the election was likely to sow further discord in U.S. politics and undermine faith in the U.S. political system, and that has been successful.

Putin succeeded because he found fertile ground. America’s partisan divide has increasingly come to resemble a cold civil war over the past quarter century, with scorched-earth tactics in Congress and a return to the viciously partisan media of the early republic. The situation worsened following a major economic crisis and the election of Obama, which was greeted by a racist backlash on the far right exemplified by Trump’s championing of the lie that the president was not born in the United States. Divided against itself, the United States was vulnerable to Russian influence operations. Trump’s consistently sympathetic attitude toward Putin built on an existing admiration for Putin’s nationalism, values, and tactics among some on the American

41 Bernie Sanders, “Sanders Statement on Iran and Russia Sanctions,” June 15, 2017.

42 CNN, “Full Transcript: CNN Democratic Debate,” April 15, 2016.

43 Ali Gharib, “How Bernie Sanders Lost the Platform Fight Over Israel,” *The Nation*, July 28, 2016.

44 This is a political reality rather than a statement that Russia’s interference was determinative. Given Trump’s tight margins of victory in key states, many factors were potentially determinative; his election is ultimately due to his own talents, the political failure of both party establishments, and the moral failure of the American people themselves faced with the candidacy of a man so unfit for office. It is clear, at least, that Russia intended to help — and did help — the Trump campaign by focusing attacks on Clinton and the Democrats, whether or not Moscow considered a Trump victory a realistic possibility.

right.<sup>45</sup> It has further impacted Republican voters, nearly half of whom now see Russia as an allied or friendly country.<sup>46</sup> With terrorism a more resonant 21st century fear for most Americans than Russian aggression, Trump portrayed Russia as a potential ally in the fight against ISIS, despite Moscow's focus on supporting the Assad regime against the rebels supported by the United States and its regional partners.

Meanwhile, ongoing investigations into links between the Russian government and Trump associates, and into whether Trump's firing of former FBI Director James Comey signals obstruction of justice, link one of the country's top foreign policy challenges with the fervent hope of millions of Democrats that Trump will be removed from office before January 2021. The simmering Trump-Russia story complicates Russia policy for the White House and members of Congress of both parties.

What is the Democratic strategy vis-à-vis Russia beyond punishing Putin for his many real sins and exploiting the Trump-Russia connections to damage and potentially remove a U.S. president not fit for office? With sanctions signed into law in August and the Trump administration's approach toward Russia still contradictory and cloudy, a more proactive Russia policy for Democrats remains undefined, with hawkish voices dominant. In formulating one, Democrats should meet the very real challenges posed by Putin's Russia. But they would be wise to follow Obama's balanced approach toward Moscow — including defense of allies and the liberal international order, restraint, and engagement — given the dangers of the present confrontation between the nuclear superpowers.

**“ America’s partisan divide has increasingly come to resemble a cold civil war over the past quarter century.”**

45 See Jeremy W. Peters, “Reverence for Putin on the Right Buys Trump Cover,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2017; Jamie Kirchick, “How the GOP Became the Party of Putin,” *Politico Magazine*, July 18, 2017; Christopher Caldwell, “How to Think About Vladimir Putin,” *Imprimis*, March 2017. Russia has also long had sympathizers on the left, the legacy of both its communist experiment in the 20th century and the left's dissatisfaction with Washington's quasi-imperialistic foreign policy. See Peter Beinart, “Donald Trump's Defenders on the Left,” *The Atlantic*, July 23, 2017.

46 Evan McMullin, “Republicans Are Risking Becoming the Party of Putin,” *The Washington Post*, June 28, 2017.

## *Punishing Trump Over Russia and Defending American Democracy*

Policy-wise, bipartisan sanctions legislation has been the Democrats' major 2017 initiative regarding Russia. While the legislation stalled in the House for some time as White House concerns were taken into account, ultimately the package passed by crushing majorities of 419-3 in the House and 98-2 in the Senate and was signed August 2 by a reluctant Trump.

The law establishes a review process allowing Congress to block any effort by Trump to ease or lift sanctions on Russia, and codified executive orders sanctioning Russia signed by Obama between 2014 and 2016. Tying the president's hands in this way was a key element stressed by Democrats. Additionally, the package introduced new sanctions on entities doing business with Russian military and intelligence agencies and the Russian energy sector, and those involved in cyberattacks on the behalf of the Russian government, and required an interagency report on corruption and ties to Putin among senior political figures and oligarchs in Russia. The sanctions met with resistance from the European Union, which saw business motives in the promotion of U.S. LNG exports and a threat to European energy companies,<sup>47</sup> and from the Executive Branch, which is rightly protective of its flexibility to conduct foreign policy as it sees fit.

The links between Trump associates and the Russian government are being thoroughly investigated by Special Counsel and former FBI director Robert Mueller, to Trump's evident alarm, as well by the House and Senate Intelligence Committees and an energized media. Trump's blunt public admission that he fired Comey over the Russia investigation is proof enough for some that he should be impeached, but impeachment is ultimately a political process rather than a legal one, Trump's party controls both houses of Congress, and Trump has a fierce right-

47 See Kristine Berzina, “Memo to Washington: Overzealous Support for European Energy Independence May Tank the Transatlantic Relationship,” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, July 27, 2017.

wing media and support base behind him. The House investigation is widely seen as tangled in partisanship, with Intelligence Committee Chairman Devin Nunes stepping down from the investigation in April after being accused of disclosing classified information.<sup>48</sup> The Senate investigation led by Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr of North Carolina and Ranking Member Mark Warner of Virginia has been viewed as more bipartisan. In early October, Burr and Warner endorsed intelligence community conclusions that Putin directed a hacking and propaganda campaign to influence the election, and stated that the “issue of collusion is still open.”<sup>49</sup> The ultimate impact of the investigations’ conclusions is difficult to predict.

The election interference brought home the seriousness of Russia’s threat to liberal democracy and the rules-based international order. “We are in a new battle of ideas, pitting not communism against capitalism, but authoritarianism against democracy and representative government,” writes Adam Schiff of California, ranking member on the House Intelligence Committee and as such a leading Democratic voice on the Trump-Russia investigations. “The narrative Putin wishes to tell is that there is no such thing as democracy, not in Russia nor in the United States, and our commitment to human rights is mere hypocrisy. Putin’s aims are served when Trump baselessly accuses President Obama of illegally wiretapping him or when the President lashes out at a secretive ‘deep state’ allegedly working against him.”<sup>50</sup>

Given that Trump seen as a leading threat to liberal democracy by many Democrats, the Trump-Russia story fits into a powerful narrative — albeit one that may have limited resonance with American voters and risks veering into the kind of conspiracy-minded

hysteria that swallowed the Republican Party this century and ultimately produced President Trump. As Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen said, “There can be a conspiracy, but the presence of a conspiracy is actually not an excuse for conspiracy thinking ... We’re seeing this sort of re-emergence of Russia as the ultimate toxic paintbrush that you can scare anybody with, and hope that it ends their political career.”<sup>51</sup>

“**Democrats should support dialogue with Russia aimed at deterring cyber warfare between the two countries.**”

Democrats are happy to get political mileage against Trump out of Russia, but many are also cognizant of the limits of the issue. As the story of Donald Trump, Jr.’s June 2016 meeting with Kremlin-connected lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya broke in

July 2017, Schiff argued, “This is about as clear of evidence you could find of intent by the campaign to collude with the Russians.”<sup>52</sup> However, other Democrats, notably Murphy, tried to refocus media attention on the embattled and unpopular Republican healthcare legislation, the far higher-stakes issue for the living standards of the American people.

However, not only should Democrats be careful to prevent the Russia angle from dominating their vocal opposition to the president. They should also take care not to prevent the United States from pursuing an intelligent Russia policy, including principled engagement with Moscow.

Even if Trump himself is untrustworthy on Russia, the Executive Branch includes plenty of knowledgeable and principled politically-appointed officials working on Russia, Ukraine, NATO, and related issues.<sup>53</sup> So far, Trump administration policy toward Russia — beyond the president’s tweets,

48 Russell Berman, “The Swift Fall of Devin Nunes,” *The Atlantic*, April 6, 2017.

49 Nicholas Fandos, “Senate Intelligence Heads Warn That Russian Election Meddling Continues,” *The New York Times*, October 4, 2017.

50 Adam Schiff, “Schiff: Putin Aims to Take Down Liberal Democracy. To Put America First, Trump Must Stand Up to Him,” *The Daily Beast*, July 6, 2017.

51 Isaac Chotiner, “How Autocratic Is He?” *Slate*, June 15, 2017.

52 Mark Landler, “Trump Goes on Attack as Russia Revelations Appear to Take Toll,” *The New York Times*, July 16, 2017.

53 To name a few such officials below the Cabinet level: Fiona Hill, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European and Russian Affairs on the National Security Council; Jon Huntsman, Ambassador to Russia; Kay Bailey Hutchison, Ambassador to NATO; A. Wess Mitchell, Assistant Secretary of State for the European and Eurasian Affairs; and Kurt Volker, Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations.

statements to the media, and private conversations with Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov — has been reasonable.<sup>54</sup>

Russia does pose serious and immediate challenges to the United States and its treaty allies which must be countered, including the sophisticated weaponization of information we have seen in the 2016 election and beyond.<sup>55</sup> Murphy and Ohio Senator Rob Portman’s bipartisan Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act, introduced in March 2016, passed through Congress and was signed into law by Obama in December, after the election. The legislation establishes an interagency center to coordinate counter-propaganda efforts throughout the government and funds non-government work analyzing foreign government disinformation techniques.

Democrats should also support dialogue with Russia aimed at deterring cyber warfare between the two countries. Five top Democratic Senators sent a letter to Trump ahead of his first in-person meeting with Putin in July, demanding that he raise and press the issue of election interference:

“It’s critical that both the Executive and Legislative branches of our government use every tool at our disposal to ensure that Putin does not believe he has a freehand to implement his manipulative program of election interference ever again. The upcoming elections [in 2017 and 2018] cannot be a playground for President Putin.”<sup>56</sup>

However, Trump has consistently downplayed Russian interference and his badly worded Twitter announcement after their meeting that “Putin & I discussed forming an impenetrable Cyber Security

unit” against election hacking was widely denounced by Democrats and Republicans alike, leading him to walk it back.<sup>57</sup>

## *A Sensible and Proactive Russia Policy*

In a July discussion of his *Foreign Affairs* article, Kaine was pressed by Brookings Institution scholar Robert Kagan to square his recommendation of strengthening democracies around the globe with not provoking Russia and China “in their backyards.” “Russian and Chinese citizens [will] seek a compelling model right in their neighborhood where there is more democracy and more freedom and they’ll say, gosh, why can’t we have more of that?” Kaine posited. Kagan argued, “that’s a very revolutionary foreign

policy” applied to countries like Ukraine and Georgia, considered by Russia and China as “geopolitical assault.” Kaine conceded, “By doing the right thing, sometimes you’ll increase tensions.”<sup>58</sup> Relatedly, in his September foreign policy speech, Sanders threw down the gauntlet to Moscow: “Today I say to Mr. Putin: we will not allow you to undermine American democracy or

democracies around the world. In fact, our goal is to not only strengthen American democracy, but to work in solidarity with supporters of democracy around the world, including in Russia.” However, Sanders failed to grapple with the consequences of geopolitical tensions with Russia<sup>59</sup> or offer a clear strategy for overcoming them.

The United States must avoid a catastrophic great power war, while understanding that elements of its strategy — including promoting democracy, human rights, and the sovereign choices of nations, and buttressing the security of NATO Allies — contribute to high tensions with Putin’s Russia. Tensions between liberal democracy and authoritarianism

“ ***If Democrats choose to champion a hardline approach toward Moscow, they should do so with clarity toward potential consequences.*** ”

54 Senators John McCain and Ben Cardin have questioned the administration’s implementation of the sanctions on Russia’s defense and intelligence sectors passed in August. John McCain, “Senators McCain and Cardin Question Administration Delay in Russia Sanctions Implementation,” October 11, 2017, <https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2017/10/senators-mccain-cardin-question-administration-delay-in-russia-sanctions-implementation>.

55 The German Marshall Fund of the United States’ Alliance for Securing Democracy is tracking Russian influence operations on Twitter with the “Hamilton 68” dashboard, a useful real-time tool. See: <http://dashboard.securingdemocracy.org/>.

56 Olivia Beavers, “Senate Dems Urge Trump to Press Putin on Election Meddling,” *The Hill*, July 6, 2017.

57 Cory Bennett, “Trump’s Cyber Tweets Cause Dismay, Confusion,” *Politico*, July 9, 2017.

58 The Brookings Institution, “A 21st Century Truman Doctrine?: U.S. Foreign Policy with Senator Tim Kaine,” July 17, 2017.

59 Will Moreland, “No Ignoring Geopolitics — Why a Foreign Policy Centered on Transnational Threats Isn’t Enough,” *The Brookings Institution*, September 27, 2017.



are inevitable — there is an inherent brittleness to authoritarian systems, and undermining the attraction of the model of the liberal West is a key goal of Russian policy because its own system is not terribly attractive to its neighbors or its own citizens. But peace requires managing an awkward coexistence.

A sensible and proactive strategy to handle Russia should shore up allies and partners in effective and creative ways while engaging Moscow directly to manage conflict, keep the peace, and achieve common goals where they exist.

In my view, Obama handled the Russia challenge respectably, refusing to let Moscow dominate a U.S. foreign policy dealing with dozens of global challenges and limiting a conflict that could have gotten much worse. The first-term “reset” yielded positive results, as has diplomatic engagement with Moscow since its collapse in 2011, most notably the 2015 Iran nuclear deal but also the 2013 deal to remove chemical weapons from Syria. Obama wisely rejected providing Ukraine with “lethal defensive weapons” in a situation where Russia has escalation dominance and doing so would have split the transatlantic alliance, though some officials in his administration and Congressional Democrats including Murphy and Gabbard supported such a step.<sup>60</sup>

**“ While the low feasibility and high costs of some sort of grand bargain with Russia should be understood, creative ways to improve relations between the United States and Russia should be part of the Democratic foreign policy debate.”**

60 Fiona Hill, now the top Europe and Russia advisor on Trump’s National Security Council, and Clifford Gaddy explained well why arming Ukraine would be counterproductive in February 2015, after a group of experts had argued in favor. Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, “How Aiding the Ukrainian Military Could Push Putin into a Regional War,” *The Washington Post*, February 5, 2015. See also: Chris Murphy, “Murphy, Blumenthal, Bipartisan Senators Call On Pres.-Elect Trump To Stand Against Russian Aggression, Support NATO and Ukrainian Sovereignty,” December 9, 2016, <https://www.murphy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/murphy-blumenthal-bipartisan-senators-call-on-pres-elect-trump-to-stand-against-russian-aggression-support-nato-and-ukrainian-sovereignty>. Tulsi Gabbard, “Rep. Tulsi Gabbard Statement on Joint Session of Congress with Ukrainian President,” September 18, 2014, <https://gabbard.house.gov/news/press-releases/rep-tulsi-gabbard-statement-joint-session-congress-ukrainian-president>.

The United States and Russia — not unlike Democrats and Republicans — have been too far apart with too little trust for meaningful compromise on key issues. This is particularly true regarding Russia’s post-Soviet neighborhood. We are still dealing with the ramifications of the Bush administration’s failed push for NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia at the dramatic 2008 Bucharest summit, which divided the alliance, raised Russian threat perceptions, and left Kyiv and Tbilisi at the altar, to negative security consequences for all. While the low feasibility and high costs of some sort of grand bargain with Russia should be understood, creative ways to improve relations between the United States and Russia should be part of the Democratic foreign policy debate.<sup>61</sup> Given the dangerous state of Russia-West relations, the higher stakes for Russia in its neighborhood, the inability of countries like Ukraine and Georgia to join the EU or NATO in the foreseeable future due to realities of European and U.S. interests and public opinion, and the many domestic and global stresses on U.S. foreign policy, an unquestioning continuation of the status quo is problematic. If Democrats, against type, choose to champion a hardline approach towards Moscow, they should do so with clarity towards potential consequences.

Georgetown University scholar and former national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia Angela Stent notes that, “For more than two decades, it has generally been a challenge to find any congressional leader who has been willing to champion a more constructive U.S.-Russian agenda.”<sup>62</sup> Congress has been played an important role, however — on a largely bipartisan basis — in

61 Michael E. O’Hanlon makes a debate-worthy case for permanent neutrality for some countries in eastern Europe in *Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe*, Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2017. In his September speech, Sanders highlighted a sister city program with Yaroslavl which he set up as mayor of Burlington, Vermont in the 1980s, and very seriously — his “bottom line” on foreign policy is that “the United States must seek partnerships not just between governments, but between peoples.” Sanders, “Read: Bernie Sanders’ Big Foreign Policy Speech.”

62 Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.–Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 260.

reassuring allies threatened by Russia and in eastern Europe with support for military assistance and visits, and in shaping punitive U.S. measures against Moscow for its human rights abuses.<sup>63</sup> These are also essential elements of a U.S. Russia strategy even if they can undermine the bilateral agenda. Murphy's proposed establishment of a \$5 billion fund to finance energy independence initiatives that advance U.S. national security interests in Russia's neighborhood and around the world is one example of a creative and proactive Democratic policy initiative.<sup>64</sup> Russia policy will be one of the most interesting elements of the Trump administration, but due to political constraints and pressing issues like North Korea, it has had a relatively quiet start. Trump's personal goodwill toward Moscow calms tensions for now. The lull is likely to continue through the Russian presidential election in March 2018, but Democrats should be ready for moves by both Putin and Trump next year.

## Conclusion

The Trump administration's foreign policy will remain erratic given an ill-informed and unpredictable president, a weak process, and differences between his advisors, which have included more or less traditional Republican politicians and thinkers, a populist nationalist wing (now somewhat depleted within government but corresponding to Trump's own instincts and capable of influencing him from outside), Trump's daughter and son-in-law, current or ex-military officers, and businesspeople.

Amid this, Democrats need to have a more robust debate about priorities and guidelines for the U.S. foreign policy of the future, amid politicians, activists, and voters, as well as experts. The foil of Trump promoting "Western civilization" but not democracy and universal values, and slamming America's doors to refugees and immigrants — as

well the luxury of not running the Executive Branch — is leading Democrats to emphasize democracy and human rights more robustly. This is a welcome development, but a policy promoting rights can raise tensions with geopolitical rivals which must be wisely managed, and should be applied as consistently as possible. This means a tougher approach toward undemocratic and increasingly illiberal allies and partners.

Containing multitudes, the United States does not speak with one voice on foreign policy. Trump's voice as president may be particularly weak if loud, given his disengagement from policy details and different messages from top administration officials.<sup>65</sup> But this is always true, given the separation of powers (despite the immense power accumulated by the Executive in this area), the federal system, and the strong nongovernmental organization sector built up over recent decades. Members of Congress conduct their own diplomacy at home and abroad. Governors, too, are stepping up international engagement, particularly given Trump's reckless abandonment of the Paris climate agreement — California's Jerry Brown flew to China the day after Trump's announcement to push green energy and was greeted like a head of state, while Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau joined the National Governors Association meeting in July to build relationships with American leaders outside Washington in support of NAFTA and other priorities.

Advocates of strong American leadership of international order in a troubled world need to make the case more convincingly to voters, particularly those outside of thriving metropolises, about how that benefits them. Obama did not sell his nuanced foreign policy well enough. Nuance and complexity are admittedly difficult to sell, but that does not mean Democrats should offer simple solutions that do not actually work to complex problems.

63 Notably, Senator Cardin, at the time the chair of the Helsinki Commission, initiated the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act to sanction Russian human rights abusers as a bill in 2010. Despite broad bipartisan support, the Obama administration resisted the legislation until it was joined with repeal of the Cold War-era Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which denied Russia normal trade relations with the United States, and passed the Congress in December 2012. Moscow responded to its passage by banning American citizens from adopting Russian children.

64 Murphy, "Rethinking the Battlefield," p. 33.

65 In terms of policy, the confused strategy and messaging on North Korea is perhaps most notable. See Laura Rosenberger, "President Trump is Making the North Korea Crisis Worse," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2017. But perhaps most revealingly, when asked by Fox News about a United Nations condemnation of President Trump's statements on neo-Nazi violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said "I don't believe anyone doubts the American people's values or the commitment of the American government or the government's agencies to advancing those values and defending those values ... The president speaks for himself." Noah Weiland, "Does Trump Represent U.S. Values? 'The President Speaks for Himself,' Tillerson Says," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2017.

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A vibrant and informed foreign policy debate will help replenish the Democrats' bench of expertise, particularly in Congress.<sup>66</sup> Experience making foreign policy from the Hill and subnational layers of government will be useful. Once a Democrat succeeds Trump in the Oval Office, she or he will need to carry out a reconstruction on the U.S. role in the world. But America's liberal democratic allies, along with many other world leaders and billions of people, will welcome it.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Some experienced foreign policy hands are also now running for Congress as Democrats, such as former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Tom Malinowski in New Jersey. See Josh Rogin, "Can these Obama-era national security officials win in Congress?" *The Washington Post*, October 1, 2017.

<sup>67</sup> See Richard Wike, Bruce Stokes, Jacob Poushter, and Janell Fetterolf, "U.S. Image Suffers as Publics Around World Question Trump's Leadership," Pew Research Center, June 26, 2017.

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