ARGUMENT

Obama’s Foreign Policy Is Winning the 2020 Democratic Primary

Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren are ready to move past the Obama administration—except when it comes to military intervention.

BY DAVID MILNE, CHRISTOPHER MCKNIGHT NICHOLS | JANUARY 22, 2020, 12:08 PM

Throughout the Democratic presidential primary, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren have been careful not to criticize Barack Obama directly—a wise move given his popularity in the party. But their campaign proposals leave little doubt that they view the former U.S. president’s domestic legacy as a series of quarter-measures shaped by a fatalistic centrism. “Medicare for All” is predicated on the notion that Obamacare—the president’s towering legislative achievement—was not close to enough. Where Obama made it easier for college students to reduce their monthly loan repayments, Sanders and Warren propose to forgive student debt and make it free to attend public college. The list goes on.

But is the gulf so wide between Obama and the left’s standard-bearers on the issue of foreign policy? Not nearly as wide as they like to suggest, or their supporters like to think.
When it comes to international trade agreements, it’s certainly true that Sanders and Obama are miles apart, with Warren splitting the difference. Sanders has consistently viewed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as an unalloyed disaster for American workers. He opposed Obama’s Trans-Pacific Partnership and was the only Senate-based candidate to vote against Trump’s successor to NAFTA, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USCMA), on Jan. 16. (With rare bipartisanship, the Senate passed it 89-10.)

But on military intervention, the differences are far less clear. Both Warren and Sanders also critique U.S. militarism as a force that enriches elites and harms the masses in terms that Obama never deployed. As Warren’s campaign platform bluntly puts it: “Washington’s foreign policy today serves the wealthy and well-connected at the expense of everyone else.”
Such rhetoric about the military sounds compelling, but what exactly does it mean in practice? The answer is less radical than it might appear. Setting international trade agreements to one side, Sanders and Warren share more on foreign policy with Obama than supporters of each might care to admit.

**During last week’s presidential debate in Iowa, Sanders fielded** CNN host Wolf Blitzer’s first question: “Why are you the best prepared person on this stage to be commander in chief?” Sanders’s answer was a near carbon copy of Obama’s response to similar questions in 2007 and 2008: “In 2002, when the Congress was debating whether or not to go into war in Iraq, invade Iraq, I got up on the floor of the House and I said that would be a disaster, it would lead to unprecedented chaos in the region.” The parallel continues. As Obama had Hillary Clinton, Sanders’s foil was Joe Biden: “Joe and I listened to what Dick Cheney and George Bush and Rumsfeld had to say. I thought they were lying. I didn’t believe them for a moment. I took to the floor. I did everything I could to prevent that war. Joe saw it differently.” In 2002, Obama was an Illinois state senator (albeit with grand ambitions), not a member of the House of Representatives. But he, like Sanders today, repeatedly invoked his opposition to the Iraq War, with direct comparison to his principal opponent, to persuade voters that his foreign-policy instincts were best.

Later in the debate, Blitzer asked Sanders about the escalating crisis in Iran, noting archly that he and the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, share a view that U.S. troops should be withdrawn from the Middle East. After observing that the United States’ two biggest foreign-policy catastrophes, Vietnam and Iraq, were launched based on lies, Sanders argued, “What we need to do is have an international coalition. We cannot keep acting unilaterally. As you know, the nuclear deal with Iran was worked on with a number of our allies.” For Sanders, Obama’s Iran deal represents exemplary
foreign-policy making.

The homage to Obama (of varying vintages in both policy and rhetoric) continued as the debate progressed. Responding to whether the United States should withdraw all forces from the Middle East, Warren observed: “We should stop asking our military to solve problems that cannot be solved militarily. Our keeping combat troops there is not helping. We need to work with our allies. We need to use our economic tools. We need to use our diplomatic tools.” In 2014, during a signature speech at West Point, Obama expressed similar caution. “To say that we have an interest in pursuing peace and freedom beyond our borders,” he declared, “is not to say that every problem has a military solution. ... Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail.”

Elaborating on the advantages of Middle East retrenchment, Sanders connected domestic challenges directly to those abroad. “In America today, our infrastructure is crumbling. Half of our people are living paycheck to paycheck,” Sanders said. “The American people are sick and tired of endless wars, which have cost us trillions of dollars.” In June 2011, announcing the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Afghanistan, Obama observed: “We have spent a trillion dollars on war, at a time of rising debt and hard economic times. Now we must invest in America’s greatest resource—our people. ... America, it is time to focus on nation building here at home. ... Let us responsibly end these wars and reclaim the American dream that is at the center of our story.”

“Responsibly” may be the operative word here. “Responsible Foreign Policy” is the title of Sanders’s foreign relations campaign issue section. Sanders and Warren would strenuously deny that any hypothetical withdrawal from the Middle East that they might endorse would be “irresponsible.” And their supporters at likeminded think tanks like the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft might note that “responsibly,” when deployed by Obama on how to withdraw from conflicts, is a rather establishment notion—one with a tendency to ensnare the United States in endless war.
But this is neither very new nor very different. Obama was no admirer of what he dismissed as the “Washington playbook.” Eying the presidency in 2007, he, too, urged “bringing a responsible end to this war in Iraq and refocusing on the critical challenges in the broader region.” He now regards the 2009 surge in Afghanistan and the 2011 intervention in Libya—the two instances when he followed that playbook—as his two gravest foreign-policy mistakes.

But, even then, Libya in 2011 was not Iraq in 2002-2003. Sanders’s own response to the prospect of Muammar al-Qaddafi perpetrating atrocities against his people reinforces this point. Sanders co-sponsored a Senate resolution that called for “the United Nations Security Council to take such further action as may be necessary to protect civilians in Libya from attack, including the possible imposition of a no-fly zone over Libyan territory.” Creating a no-fly zone does not happen bloodlessly—it is a military intervention. As a skeptical defense secretary, Robert Gates, clarified at the time: “Let’s just call a spade a spade. A no-fly zone begins with an attack on Libya to destroy the air defenses. That’s the way you do a no-fly zone.”

In 2011, then, Sanders was more hawkish on Libya than Gates, the incumbent George W. Bush-appointed Pentagon chief. Indeed, Sanders is not a straightforward anti-war candidate. In 1999, Sanders supported U.S.-led NATO military action against Slobodan Milosevic’s Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to prevent ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. In 2001, Sanders backed the Bush administration’s military action against Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. In 2014, in her first major national security speech, Warren called for better training programs and decried civilian casualties as well as excessive force but made little or no reference to overall drone policy itself. While in a 2015 interview with ABC’s George Stephanopoulos, Sanders said he would continue to use drones “very, very selectively and effectively.” This suggests that the difference from Obama is one of degree, not of type.
In fact, if a President Sanders or President Warren came to resemble Obama in the sense that their plans for limiting U.S. commitments abroad and responsible use of hard power are complicated, say, by the renascence of the Islamic State or proxy conflicts or acts of terrorism stemming from the strike on Iranian military commander Qassem Suleimani, it would scarcely reflect poorly on them.

And it is worth remembering that Obama departed sharply from his post-Cold War presidential predecessors in many respects. Critics of U.S. empire and perpetual war tend to place Obama on a seamless post-Cold War continuum—Stephen Wertheim and Samuel Moyn wrote in the Washington Post that Obama “cemented more than reversed America’s disregard of international constraints on warmaking.” Yet Obama also opened relations with Cuba, negotiated a comprehensive nuclear deal with Iran, withdrew troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, and pursued a very lonely path when he pulled back from the brink of military action against Syria, erasing the red line he had drawn after Bashar al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons breached it. On troop withdrawals, Sanders once told Obama advisor Ben Rhodes, “Obama doesn’t get enough credit for how many troops Obama took out from Afghanistan.”

These are no small things. They riled not just Republicans who reflexively opposed everything he did but also figures at the heart of the Democratic Party establishment. In 2013, Vali Nasr, then-dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, wrote an entire book that criticized Obama for reducing United States to a lowly position as a “dispensable nation.” He lamented that cautious Obamian statecraft had ensured that “[g]one is the exuberant American desire to lead the world.” Hillary Clinton famously chided Obama for nominating “don’t do stupid shit” as his core strategic doctrine, noting grandly that “great nations need organizing principles, and ‘don’t do stupid stuff’ is not an organizing
principle.” Obama’s foreign policies surely made the right enemies.

Mainstream critiques of Obama, then, share common elements with those leveled at Warren and Sanders. Biden presents himself as the Obama continuity-candidate, but Warren and Sanders have at least as strong a claim. In seeking out a model for pragmatic, retrenchment-inclined, diplomacy-prioritizing foreign-policy leadership, Sanders and Warren could certainly do a lot worse than America’s 44th president. They all share a common desire to do less in the world in order to achieve more at home—even if they sharply disagree on how much “more” is possible in a political system designed to check ambitious reform. If Warren or Sanders is elected president, she or he will face similar dilemmas to those that confronted Obama regarding the use of force. Previous form suggests that they may well respond in similar ways. The burdens of office have a way of sullying the purest-sounding pre-presidential intentions.

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