

The Sullivan Model

Jake Sullivan, Biden’s “once-in-a-generation intellect,” is facing a once-in-a-generation challenge.

BY ELISE LABOTT

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Jake Sullivan, U.S. President Joe Biden’s national security advisor, has always loved a good debate. As an undergraduate at Yale University, he placed third in the nationals; at the University of Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar, he finished second in the world debating championship. He got started in politics by handling debate prep for Amy Klobuchar when she made her successful run at the Senate, and he later did the same for Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in their runs for the White House.

Now, inside the White House, Sullivan is still debating—with himself. Having once been a champion of the traditional foreign-policy consensus, he is now questioning how national security can be reframed first and foremost to address domestic needs. For years, a cultlike narrative has followed Sullivan, who at 44 is the youngest top national security official in the Biden administration and the youngest national security advisor in almost 60 years; everyone speaks of his rare combination of precocious talent, maturity, and devotion to country. Plus, in a town of sharp elbows, he’s a genuinely nice guy. Comparisons already abound between Sullivan and Brent Scowcroft, former national security advisor to Presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush, a man who is considered the gold standard in strategic thinking about foreign policy.

When Biden introduced Sullivan as his pick to lead the National Security Council (NSC), he called him a “once-in-a-generation intellect.” He’s now got to apply that to what many consider a once-in-a-generation challenge, as a deeply divided country seeks to redefine its role in the world and wrestle with a strategic challenge—the rise of China—the likes of which it has never seen.

In his first few weeks, Sullivan has already faced an avalanche of foreign-policy challenges. He’s gone toe-to-toe with combative Chinese officials, seen a coup in Burma, a massive Russian hack of U.S. companies and federal agencies, and a North Korean ballistic missile test. He still has to wrestle with a deadline to pull U.S. troops from Afghanistan, and how, and under what conditions, to restart nuclear talks with Iran. All that comes amid an ongoing pandemic, economic headwinds, a climate crisis, and raging political division that led to a violent insurrection two weeks before he took up his post.

Both Sullivan’s strengths—Hillary Clinton calls him a “problem-solver, first and foremost”—and his worldview make him a national security advisor uniquely suited to meet the moment.

Clinton told me Sullivan was one of the first people she hired when nominated as secretary of state.

“We’ve seen what four years of divisiveness has led to—which is, unfortunately, undermining our leadership globally,” Clinton said. “Jake not only has the intellectual firepower, he has the people skills. He is truly a diplomat in the broadest sense of that word—he understands how to listen, how to bring people together, and how to strategize toward the objective.”

Sullivan, despite the carnage of recent years, has faith in America’s capacity for renewal. When tempers flared at a meeting last month between top U.S. and Chinese officials in Alaska, Sullivan shot back: “A confident country is able to look hard at its own shortcomings and constantly seek to improve. And that is the secret sauce of America.”

“I was raised in Minnesota, the American Midwest, in the era of *Red Dawn* and the fall of the Berlin Wall,” he told me. “That gave me a deep, abiding belief in this country, in American leadership and capacity for good in the world—and I will fight for it.”

But, surprisingly for someone at the center of crafting U.S. foreign policy, Sullivan’s focus is on domestic renewal. What he is trying to do at the NSC, said his chief of staff Yohannes Abraham, is align national security, economic, and domestic policies into a “seamless broader whole,” working with Brian Deese, director of the National Economic Council, and Susan Rice, Sullivan’s predecessor under President Obama who now runs the Domestic Policy Council.

With the recent COVID-19 relief package, for example, Sullivan—who wrote in *Foreign Policy* last year that lack of domestic investment is a “bigger threat to national security than the U.S. national debt”—ordered the NSC to help the White House secure the bill’s passage. Sullivan “felt as much ownership and was excited as anyone” when it was signed into law, Abraham said.

The administration’s proposed \$3 trillion economic recovery package, likewise, sets out to get the domestic house in order as a way to bolster America’s ability to compete on the global stage by investing in new infrastructure and such sectors as renewable energy and semiconductors.

“The issues we have to combat and put a lot of resources behind don’t respect neat organizational boundaries,” Abraham said. “He is uniquely positioned to understand where the seams are and how we should work across those seams.”

Perhaps the biggest challenge for Sullivan will be realizing what he, like the president, calls a “foreign policy for the middle class.” Instead of divorcing U.S. foreign-policy actions—whether fighting terrorists in the Middle East or pursuing new trade deals—from domestic policy, Sullivan and his boss are trying to meld the two.

“Everything we do in our foreign policy and national security will be measured by a basic metric,” Sullivan said recently. “Is it going to make life better, safer, and easier for working families?”

Strategy is the matching of objectives and resources, and every U.S. president since Franklin D. Roosevelt has had to make the same judgement call: whether to prioritize domestic needs or global leadership. Biden seems to be striving for a Goldilocks policy—one that lifts the middle class, outflanks China in the global economic and geopolitical arena, and maintains America’s role as the indispensable nation.

While peace and security undoubtedly serve all Americans, there is no so-called middle-class policy for many of the national security decisions the administration will have to make beyond trade issues, such as deciding when and how to withdraw from Afghanistan and Iraq, finding the most effective means to curb Iran’s nuclear program and malign behavior across the Middle East, or determining how to stop Russian influence operations. The administration will also have to decide if competition with China will supersede the need to work with Beijing on issues related to North Korea, climate change, and other transnational threats.

Those are a lot of circles to square. Brian Katulis, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a progressive think tank, said Sullivan “has defined the challenges and thrown up a lot of important questions very thoughtfully. But the real task is to answer them with clarity and do it in a way that maintains support here at home for an engagement in the world that says what America stands for.”

Biden and Sullivan recognize there is little appetite among the U.S. public for an adventurist foreign policy in which the United States tries to solve every problem, even in places where U.S. interests are far from clear.

John Bolton, one of Sullivan’s predecessors and one of former President Donald Trump’s many national security advisors, believes favoring domestic needs over foreign policy is “simply wrong.” He agrees that China poses the greatest threat to the United States, but he argues that countering the threat will take “more vigorous international presence” than Biden has in mind.

“Otherwise you are ceding the field,” Bolton said in an interview. “The best way to stand against the Chinese is with as many allies as you can get on your side. That requires a very extensive international involvement.”

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When Biden introduced Sullivan and Antony Blinken—another familiar face in the foreign-policy establishment, now secretary of state—as part of his national security team, Sen. Marco Rubio tweeted: “Biden’s cabinet picks went to Ivy League schools, have strong resumes, attend all the right conferences & will be polite & orderly caretakers of America’s decline.”

The barb stung. But while he enjoyed an elite education, Sullivan insists his worldview was formed in Minneapolis, where he attended public school and grew up in a close-knit Irish Catholic family. His parents—both educators—kept a globe in the middle of the kitchen table, where they would talk to Sullivan and his four siblings about global politics.

Minnesota has always had a pull on him. After clerking for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, Sullivan turned down a six-figure salary at a top law firm in Washington to return home, joining a smaller practice in Minnesota. At 30, he became counsel for Sen. Klobuchar, advising her on both domestic and foreign policy and traveling with her on congressional trips abroad, starting with Iraq.

That combination of smarts and Minnesota nice has made Sullivan the darling of Democratic political circles. But despite having cut his teeth in some of the most contentious political

campaigns in recent American history, he hasn't gotten mired in the bitter partisanship some of his colleagues have faced. Like Biden, whose modest upbringing in Scranton, Pennsylvania, shaped his politics, Sullivan has spent years thinking about how America's role in the world relates to the actual experiences of the American people.

"He is smart but incredibly humble, which I believe allowed him to talk about these complex issues in regular terms, so that people can relate to," Klobuchar told me. "He's always been the one that people trust. And that's served him really well, because a lot of people don't make the transition from campaigns to government. In his heart he is someone who wants to govern and make change for the world, but he made it through the ugliness of campaigns to get there. And I think that made him a better policy person."

Klobuchar tried to keep Sullivan as her chief of staff, but he joined Clinton's 2008 campaign for president. After the election, ultimately won by Obama, Sullivan planned on heading back to Minnesota. But when Clinton was named secretary of state, she made Sullivan her deputy chief of staff and, later, director of policy planning at 34, the youngest ever to hold the position.

He was unusually active in that role. When the Obama administration weighed making a deal with Iran that would curtail Tehran's quest for nuclear weapons in exchange for economic relief, Clinton tapped Sullivan and her deputy, Bill Burns, to open up a back channel. In July 2012, while Clinton was on a State Department trip to Paris, Sullivan slipped away and flew off secretly with Burns to meet Iranian officials in Oman—the first of about a half-dozen secret meetings that paved the way for negotiations that would culminate in the 2015 nuclear accord. (Trump walked away from the deal in 2018, and Iran has since begun accelerating its production of uranium.)

In a recent interview, Burns, now the director of the CIA, called Sullivan the "ideal negotiating partner." He is "tireless, unflappable and relentlessly attentive to detail," Burns said.

In his time at the State Department, Sullivan was honing a few of the skills that would later presumably serve him well as national security advisor. Since Clinton traveled so much, her aides often had to rely on Sullivan—who typically flew with her—to make their case on any given policy. Sullivan never played gatekeeper, recalled Clinton's former communications director Philippe Reines, but rather was an honest broker—an invaluable attribute for a future national security advisor whose traditional role is to solicit a wide range of ideas and present a slate of options to the president.

"It's very easy to resent a national security advisor, if you don't think that they are relaying your position," Reines said. "What's remarkable about Jake is not only can you count on him to relay your position, but he always does it better than you will."

Clinton agreed. "He doesn't betray his own preferences," she said of Sullivan. "He is at the table to make sure that he can help create the highest-quality decision-making"

And Sullivan was always a quick study. As Clinton's one term as secretary of state was winding down, Obama's aides were angling to bring Sullivan over to the White House, though he was already itching to get back to Minnesota. During Obama's last trip with Clinton to Asia, he hosted a lunch for the secretary of state and her staff in Myanmar, the opening of which was one of the administration's big (if fleeting) foreign-policy successes. Obama turned to Sullivan for a brief history of the country.

“I don’t know a whole lot,” Sullivan began, before launching into a virtual dissertation on the topic—something colleagues say they’ve seen him do dozens of times on any number of subjects. A few weeks later, Obama asked Sullivan to replace Blinken as then-Vice President Biden’s national security advisor.

It wasn’t an easy sell. Sullivan had already delayed his return to Minnesota to finish Clinton’s term, but he planned to move back when she left the State Department, aiming to run for Congress or become a U.S. attorney. Eventually, Obama prevailed, and Sullivan moved to the White House, where he oversaw Biden’s outreach to Asia and Latin America. He also attended the president’s daily intelligence briefing and emerged as a key voice on Obama’s national security team and in the Situation Room.

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At the State Department, Clinton and Sullivan emphasized “economic statecraft”—things like commercial diplomacy, job creation, and overseas investment—as an important driver of foreign policy. In a 2011 speech at the Economic Club of New York, Clinton called America’s economic strength and its global leadership “a package deal.”

But after he left government, Sullivan told me, he realized that their lofty economic vision wasn’t connecting with Americans back home. He began thinking about how all the cogs and wheels of the international system, from international organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO) to global supply chains, were all connected. And he started pulling on the thread.

Take the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a 12-nation trade deal crafted by Obama and, for a while, championed by Clinton and Sullivan. Like so many in the Democratic and Republican foreign-policy establishment, Sullivan thought the trade pact would be essential to countering China and giving an economic foundation to the famous “pivot to Asia.” Over time, he came to believe that while the deal might secure opportunities for U.S. companies, it neglected the potentially negative impact on American workers. (Trump scuppered the TPP in his first week in office.)

By 2017, when Sullivan had left office and Trump was swinging a wrecking ball on U.S. foreign policy, Sullivan put his name to a series of think tank reports supporting the traditional U.S.-led international order. And then he started questioning himself, and the sanctity of those foreign-policy pieties.

“We still need a rules-based order, but institutions are outdated and new ones need to be created,” he told me. “If the past 70 years of the post-World War II world order have been like classical Greek architecture—the straight lines and neat columns of the Parthenon—then the future will look more like Frank Gehry: unexpected angles, a mix of materials, and experimentation.”

The 2016 presidential campaign was critical to Sullivan’s political evolution. He joined Clinton’s campaign as a senior policy advisor and became more attuned to such issues as immigration, health care, and gun control. Sen. Bernie Sanders, Clinton’s main opponent in the primaries, identified the disconnect between a large segment of Americans and their government.

“I didn’t always agree with his ultimate policy solutions, but there’s no question he connected with how much of America experiences and perceives the impacts of systemic inequality, and this sense that the system was somehow working against them,” Sullivan said of Sanders.

Once Sanders dropped out of the race, Clinton faced a new rival in Trump—one who would channel that same despair and anger into a winning populist message. Sullivan found Trump was “bereft of values” but adept at relating to many Americans’ perceptions of foreign policy and their economic prosperity.

After Clinton’s surprising loss in the 2016 election, Sullivan wanted to get out of town. He’d gotten married the year before to Maggie Goodlander, a lawyer and former advisor to Sens. Joe Lieberman and John McCain. After the bruising 2016 campaign, he wanted to put down roots somewhere outside of Washington. His new wife wasn’t thrilled with the idea of moving back to Minnesota.

“I said let’s make a home that is ours somewhere outside of the country’s political and economic centers, where we can be close to family and part of a community,” he told me. They moved to New Hampshire, where Goodlander’s family lived. In the meantime, as a part-time fellow with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, he reconnected with Salman Ahmed, a fellow alumnus from the Obama White House who had been writing about how American foreign policy was affecting the middle class.

In 2017, Carnegie formed a bipartisan task force on the issue. Over the next two years, Sullivan and Ahmed talked to hundreds of Americans from across the political spectrum in Ohio, Colorado, and Nebraska about what they wanted from U.S. foreign policy. The task force’s [report](#), titled “Making U.S. Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class,” argued that globalization has not benefited working Americans and recommended a set of new foreign-policy priorities to benefit the middle class—including greater attention to income equality, a broader debate about trade, and a “less ambitious” foreign policy that ends long, costly wars.

Here was a change. The long-standing foreign-policy consensus that guided Republican and Democratic administrations for decades, the report argued, “left too many American communities vulnerable to economic dislocation and overreached in trying to effect broad societal change within other countries. America’s middle class wants a new path forward.”

The report helped open the floodgates to a reexamination of America’s traditional foreign-policy tenets. But Biden had already pointed the way earlier. As vice president, Biden was the one in the Situation Room questioning how that administration would explain to the American people how any given foreign-policy decision mattered to them.

“I think he was actually ahead of all of us,” Ahmed said of Biden. “If you look at the moments at which he might have been an outlier or at odds with some of policies in the Obama administration, I think some of it was born of a greater sensitivity to that question.”

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The job of a national security advisor is, essentially, to turn daily chaos into practical options for the commander in chief. Under Trump, the entire process was derailed. He ignored the input of most agencies and repeatedly changed national policy with a single tweet. Sullivan, if changed in many ways, is old-school in his approach to his job.

He is trying to restore the “regularity and rigor” of the foreign-policy decision-making process, said Abraham, his chief of staff. Sullivan is also updating the NSC to address transnational threats neglected under the previous administration: elevating cybersecurity to a deputy national security advisor position, creating a new directorate on emerging technologies, and reestablishing Obama-era directorates on global health and climate dissolved during the Trump years. Democracy, corruption, and kleptocracy are also taking on new importance—as is the need to combat the growing threat of domestic extremism.

Bolton doesn’t agree with Biden on much. But he acknowledges that Biden’s election “reflects a return to normalcy,” which gives Sullivan a “significant advantage” that Bolton never had in his time as national security advisor.

“It’s a lot easier to have coherent, sustained policies when you’ve got a president who understands that’s what you ought to be aiming for than when you have a president who doesn’t have the slightest idea of what the right approach is,” Bolton said.

China is a good example. Sullivan doesn’t quibble with Trump’s instinct to get tough on Beijing or his belief that organizations like the WTO have flubbed fundamental issues—state-owned enterprises, currency manipulation, trade barriers, and the like. He does, however, believe Trump’s zero-sum approach—including slapping tariffs on U.S. allies—prevented the United States from banding together with other democracies to put pressure on China.

To build a better China policy, Sullivan turned to Kurt Campbell, Clinton’s former top diplomat for East Asia and a chief architect of the stillborn pivot to Asia. Campbell said he wasn’t keen to go back into government until Sullivan made a personal appeal.

“Everything we wanted to do in Asia we have a chance to do now, and it’s incredibly important that we continue,” Campbell recalled Sullivan telling him. “It meant something to me. And I was really honored to say yes.” As the White House’s first Indo-Pacific coordinator, Campbell oversees many of the NSC directorates that cover Asia- and China-related issues.

Soon after he joined the administration, Campbell recalled, he and Sullivan had a meeting with a group of foreign ministers. Campbell had about 30 seconds to brief Sullivan on a complex set of issues. “I remember feeling frustrated and anxious, like, you know, is he going to be able to manage this?” Sullivan turned around and gave a presentation like the one he had done for Obama in Myanmar. “It made me realize that you’re dealing with a rare talent here,” Campbell said.

Campbell wasn’t the only familiar face Sullivan brought back. He recruited several former Obama officials, including Jon Finer, former Secretary of State John Kerry’s chief of staff, as his

deputy; Brett McGurk, a former envoy to the anti-Islamic State coalition, to run Middle East policy; and Jennifer Harris, who worked with him at State on Clinton's economic statecraft agenda and now has a dual-hatted role as the senior director for international economics and labor at both the NSC and National Economic Council. It seems a recipe for groupthink—something Clinton told me Sullivan is “allergic to”—and yet it's not. Sullivan is habitually the chief questioner of the tenets of foreign policy and any assumptions brought to the table—even his own.

“It's whimsical,” Campbell said. “He's got a bit of an Irish poet in him.”

Take Iran. Given Biden's campaign pledge to revive the nuclear deal and Sullivan's own role in the negotiations, many expected the administration to promptly return to the status quo of three years ago, when Trump pulled out of the accord. But Sullivan and Blinken have both changed their thinking. Instead of treating the nuclear deal apart from Iran's other malign behavior, they now believe any new deal with Tehran should address Iran's missile program and terrorist activities across the region.

“There are people who are worried they are going to look stupid if they question something that is fundamental,” Ahmed said. “But he has enough confidence to say, wait a minute, why are we sure about that? How do we know?”

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The Obama band may be back together, but the music is much different. The world and America's role in it have changed in the past four years. There's no back to the future for Sullivan. In his early meetings with foreign diplomats, he told them, “We aren't Trump, but we aren't Obama either.”

One might be forgiven for thinking Biden's “Build Back Better” philosophy bears some hallmarks of his direct predecessor's populist agenda, albeit a more humane and empathetic one. Both favor a more modest international involvement and some degree of economic nationalism. But the similarities end there. Trump's “Make America Great Again” foreign policy viewed alliances with suspicion, embraced authoritarian strongmen, and viewed U.S. leadership as either a burden or a bargaining chip. For Biden (and Sullivan), alliances are a source of strength, and U.S. leadership is a pennies-on-the-dollar way to keep threats far from American shores.

It is an attractive philosophy that leaves a lot of unanswered questions—Leslie Gelb, the late president of the Council on Foreign Relations and one of Sullivan's mentors, used to chide Democrats for “positioning without taking a position.” Beyond increasing competitiveness through domestic investment, the administration has yet to flesh out its foreign-policy agenda or how it will build political support for it.

“The domestic politics in the United States right now make it increasingly hard to marshal solutions to anything other than problems that put America up against the wall like coronavirus and, increasingly, China,” noted Richard Fontaine, the CEO of the Center for a New American Security and a former advisor to McCain. “But there are 100 other things that we need to be doing, including in foreign policy. So it can't be the whole answer.”

At the end of the day, for a man who, like his boss, likes to define the current challenge as one between democracy and authoritarianism, Sullivan has been dealt a terrible hand. Before he came into office, the previous president spent weeks spreading lies about election fraud. Then there was a violent assault on the U.S. Capitol seeking to overturn the results of the election. In the meantime, states like Georgia and Texas have worked overtime to suppress voting rights.

“Coming together is going to be key,” Sullivan said. “And, importantly, the world is watching us. They are watching vaccines and the American rescue plan, and so far they are largely impressed by American resilience. But the big question is can we come together? I don’t know, but President Biden believes we can, and he is the right person to try and make it happen.”