

RECENT CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS IN US FOREIGN POLICY

Daniel Benjamin, director of the Dickey Center for International Understanding, introduced Jake Sullivan during his visit to Dartmouth as one of the few people in Washington who everyone knows by a single name – “Jake.” The youngest-ever Director of Policy Planning for the Secretary of State (Hillary’s Ear), Mr. Sullivan assisted Secretary Clinton, and later Vice-President Joe Biden, on a host of critical national security issues for over five years. After stepping down from his influential roles in the Obama Administration to teach at Yale Law School, Sullivan has continued to utilize his policy-crafting and diplomatic expertise to guide ongoing Iranian nuclear talks as Senior Advisor to the U.S. Delegation on the Iranian Nuclear Negotiations. World Outlook sat down with Jake Sullivan to discuss Iran, foreign policy, and diplomacy.

What are some of the hurdles that you had to overcome in order to participate in the face-to-face negotiations with the Iranians in Milan?

The first and most significant hurdle was actually establishing a channel. In the years leading up to the direct negotiations, there had been dealings with Iran through the P5+1 process: the permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany, where the US sat at the table with Iran along with these other countries. The US was comfortable with that, Iran was comfortable with that: it was sort of a big tent. But it became clear over time that this issue would only really get resolved if the US and Iran were talking face to face in a bilateral channel. How do you set that up when there are no natural vehicles for the US and Iran to talk to one another substantively? We considered a wide variety of possibilities, and ultimately it was the Sultan of Oman who came forward and said he could facilitate this conversation. But even after we had our first discussion, and that was in the summer of 2012, it was several months before we had the next one because the second obstacle after the initial channel establishment was the long-standing mistrust between the United States and Iran going back to 1979. This mistrust has been reinforced over the years—for a variety of reasons, and due to a variety of factors. So you have the first meeting and there is some feeling of progress but not a lot of confidence that this can go anywhere in the second meeting in the spring of 2013. It wasn’t really until you had a new president in Iran that the Iranians were really serious about having this conversation. That’s when we began much more frequent engagements that ultimately led to the joint plan of action.

Was there any specific reason, other than the Sultan of Oman’s invitation, that Oman was chosen as a place to negotiate?

Oman is a country that has historically good relations with both the United States and Iran. The Sultan is a leader who has the respect of both

President Obama and Secretary Clinton as well as the respect of the Iranian leadership. And so, I think both sides viewed him as an honest broker and viewed Oman as a country that was really capable of providing the kind of facilitation that was required here. I would add that this came to pass on the heels of the episode involving hikers who had been seized on the Iranian border and were held unjustly in our view in Iran for months, even longer. The Omanis were helpful in resolving that situation, so they had already shown that they were capable of using their good offices to positive effect. I think that contributed as well to the confidence we had in this channel.

Do you think that as we communicated more with the Iranians, at least a little confidence began to come back to repair relations at the basic level?

I don't know if I would say that confidence has returned, because confidence really comes with concrete action. And while the Iranians have complied with the joint plan of action over the past year and a half, real confidence will only follow from a comprehensive agreement that resolves international committee's concerns that Iran has actually, verifiably implemented.

What has come through is a capacity on both sides to engage in conversation in a way that is actually driving towards a solution. Now conversation is in the more normal course. Diplomats in the two countries are able to get together to talk about the nuclear file, up to and including the Secretary of State and foreign minister of Iran. So, it's less about us having been able to build confidence, but we have been able to establish a constructive mechanism for dialog to happen that doesn't require the kind of heavy lifting that was required when we set this channel up. And that's good because it means that the transaction costs for actually having the conversation have gone down. The substantive hurdles and actually getting to an agreement are still there. But it's no longer a question about can we talk, but rather, what will we talk about?

Given these indicators of progress, do you believe it's possible for US-Iranian relations to improve in the immediate future? For example, do you think that we would have an embassy there anytime soon?

I think that is less likely, because even if we resolve the nuclear issue, there are significant and deep concerns that the United States has about Iranian policy, both at home and around the world. You've got the Iranian sponsorship of terrorism and Iran's destabilizing activities in the region, Iran's abusive human rights at home, and it will take more than just a nuclear deal for us to get to a point where normalization is a serious prospect.

And how has the emergence of the Islamic state sort of changed our calculus regarding Iran in the region?

I wouldn't say that it's changed any of the fundamental dimensions of

our calculus, but let me talk about three different angles. The first angle is the nuclear file. We have worked hard to keep the nuclear file from the regional affairs, and the reason for that is that we can't trade one off against the other. There are certain fundamental things we need on the nuclear file, and we need these things irrespective of what is happening. So the nuclear file really hasn't been profoundly affected by what's happening with ISIS. The second angle is that, of course, events in the world form part of the context for negotiations and as a backdrop to what is happening, obviously the role of Iran in the region, the role of the United States in the region, are present in the minds of negotiators on both sides. They don't end up making a decisive difference on nuts and bolts of nuclear agreement, but they are there, and that's undeniable. The third angle is what happens in the event that we do reach an agreement. Our concerns about Iran don't end there. We feel like Iran's activities in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon, with respect to Hamas and Israel, and other places as well are deeply problematic and are likely to remain problematic after the nuclear agreement. And we have to be prepared to respond to a deal with that, even in the context of achieving a comprehensive agreement.

Considering that these international agreements have faced domestic opposition both in the United States and Iran, how do you think that the public will receive a sort of agreement on the nuclear issue in both Iran and the US?

In the United States, it fundamentally depends on our ability to make the case to both the Congress and the American people. If the deal does not do what we say it will do—and that is to verifiably cut off all Iran's paths to a nuclear weapon, because that's the deal I think, that's the only deal we will go for. I have confidence that we can sell it. If we can sell it to the Congress, we can sell it to the American people. On the Iranian side, they have a system where the Supreme Leader is the ultimate decision maker. And if he gives his team the green light to sign on the dotted line, metaphorically—I don't think it will actually happen—then we will have every expectation and I think the world might have expectations to follow through on it. That's not to say that there are factions in Iran that are skeptical or in opposition to this deal. But if they sign up to this thing, it's their job to bring all of that in line and to follow through on its terms. And a lot of, I think, the uncertainty and skepticism in the United States in certain quarters can be addressed and resolved simply by us being able to effectively make the presentation that in all of its dimensions. This deal will prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. And that is, for us, the scene we want out of the deal. And that is the basic metric by which these deals should be judged.

The United States and Iran have both looked to Saudi Arabia as an indicator regarding the competing regional powers within the Middle East. Do you see the recent death of Saudi

Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to have any effect on the stability of the region or on the relations with the United States?

On the relations with the US question, I think President Obama's visit there reinforced the notion that whoever the King is, there are some enduring bonds and ties and interests between the United States and Saudi Arabia. And I think he sent that message powerfully through his visit, and the substance of the conversation also reaffirmed that. Successions, in terms of stability, always present questions and challenges. This is a time of transition in Saudi Arabia. We just saw a Cabinet reshuffle today, and we will see more change in Saudi Arabia in the coming weeks. And so one shouldn't be totally sanguine about how things go. But the United States has, I think, pretty strong confidence that the new King and his new team will be capable of carrying out the security and the economic partnership that we've had, and play a role in the region that is ultimately consistent with our interests. As we look forward, I think we are going to have a series of strategic dialogues with Saudi Arabia and with other partners about all of the—for lack of a better term, or maybe this is a technical term—crazy things that are happening in the region right now. What do we do about that? What's our mid- to long-term strategy on that? I hope that the conversation that began with King Salman will continue in the months and years ahead because Saudi Arabia and the United States have got to be on the same page. Not just about ISIS, not just about Iran, but about what a vision for the region is that ultimately addresses some of the fundamental, underlying drivers of conflict and instability. That's got to be a serious adult conversation. And it's got to be a sustained conversation.

What is your response to those who say that a sort of nuclear deal with Iran would be seen in Saudi Arabia as an America that is moving or distancing itself from Saudi Arabia, considering the two see each other as rivals?

Well, as I've just said, that strategic conversation between the United States and Saudi Arabia has to continue in earnest. That is crucial for the bilateral relationship. It's crucial for our regional strategy. It is also crucial for us making clear to Saudi Arabia what a nuclear deal with Iran is, and what it's not. And I think if we are able to deepen our security ties with Saudi Arabia, continue to stay closely aligned with them on the big questions in the region, and have transparency and credibility with them on nuclear issues with respect to Iran, then we can emerge from this deal, stronger as opposed to having more distance between us. But that requires placing a high premium on that type of consultation, and that consultation can only take place at the highest levels. President, Secretary of State, CIA director, Secretary of Defense, Vice President, those—all of those people have to be fundamentally engaged in the process going forward.

You worked very closely with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Vice President Joe Biden during your time with the administration. What, do you believe, were the most important policy goals that they have accomplished and which ones still remain?

For Secretary Clinton, I think that her most important contribution to US foreign policy was her central role to the US rebalance in the Asia Pacific. This is something that, from her first few weeks as Secretary of State, she was focused on, and she carried the flag to her last day on the job. She took her first trip to Asia, she was crucial in reestablishing strong ties with southeast Asian countries, reinforcing our alliances, setting up mechanisms to manage the US-China relationship, and so many other dimensions of that relationship. I believe much of the history of the 21st century will be written in the Asian Pacific and there is no more consequential geopolitical fact than the rise of China. Have the US well situated as the leader in the Asia Pacific, shaping rules-based order for the century ahead. That is as profound an accomplishment as you could ask as Secretary of State to deliver for you in four year time span.

For Vice President Biden, one of the things I worked very closely with him on was deepening US ties in this hemisphere in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Vice President has spoken about a hemisphere that is middle class, secure, and democratic, from Canada to Chile and everywhere in between. That vision is not, by any means, out of reach. That can be, and should be, a strategic goal of the United States: alliance-free market democracies throughout the hemisphere as a global platform for security, stability, prosperity. I think his down payments on that—the things that he has done in the last two years to advance that goal, combined with the President's announcement on Cuba—have positioned us very well strategically on this set of issues.

Speaking of Cuba, what are your thoughts on the recent announcement of potential embassy there?

So when I was director of policy planning, and then during my stint at the White House, I was involved in the effort to bring about this normalization, and was a champion for a different approach. One of the things that you learn after you spend a few years in the government in Washington is that there is a great deal of inertia behind policy. Things can continue to not work for year after year, decade after decade, and it takes leadership, foresight, and strength to say, 'You know what? When something's not working, I'm going to try something else.' And so, I think the President has made the right decision in pursuing this new policy. I think what the American people and the Congress need to understand is that this is really a question about tactics, because the fundamental objective of critics on the Hill of his policy and the President himself are the same. It is fundamentally the advancement of economic political freedom, of Cuban people, and the disagreement is just over what is

the best way to bring that about. The President believes the way we have been trying for the last umpteen years has not been working.

What happened in the last few years that allowed this diplomatic breakthrough and were there economic factors and political factors that lined up just right?

So one aspect has just been the passage of time. That, you know, it has been so long since we had been trying the old policy, it was time to try something new. One aspect is that there have been small, modest adjustments in the Cuban approach. I don't want to overstate them, because it is still fundamentally a dictatorship that suppresses the rights and aspiration of its people. But small, modest changes that suggest an openness on the Cuban side to do this, and then you had a President who, when he came into office, felt that this was something he wanted to keep a close eye on, and if he felt there was an opportunity to move forward on this, he would. And the opportunity presented itself after a series of talks. And so, the President seized it.

How does the status of Guantanamo affect our relationship with Cuba now? Is that a new issue that has come up, or something that we have put inside another box?

Cubans will always say, 'You should return Guantanamo to us.' We have our views, and they have theirs. I don't believe that it would fundamentally disrupt the steps that each side is taking right now, but it is a reminder that here are issues, like that one, and like many others, that remain sources of enormous tension between us, and this relationship is not going to become hunky-dory, or friendly. It will remain tense and difficult because we have a fundamentally different view about what is right and just than the current Cuban leadership has. As long as that remains the case, there will be friction between us, but that doesn't mean that we cannot establish a diplomatic system where we can engage with one another, where we can try to drive openings in the Cuban economically, that could potentially lead to political openings. That is what the President is trying to pursue.

Speaking of the current leadership in Cuba, do you believe that the Castros and their successors will be more open to the United States if we take concrete steps in normalizing trade relations?

Look, I think any leader is going to be more willing to do something on their part if they feel like they are getting something out of a deal. And that would be true in this case. It would certainly make them happy for us to take further steps on the embargo, and further steps on things like Guantanamo, on various designations we have of the Cuban regime, but I think that shouldn't be our metric. Our metric should be quite simple, which is, in the US national security interest. And what is in the interest of the Cuban people?

One of the things on the US national security interest side is that the

issue of Cuba has been a real distraction and a point of division with other countries in Latin America. And the concept of this platform is alliance of free market democracies throughout the hemisphere fundamentally advanced by us taking the Cuba issue off the table. Not making it about us anymore. Instead, turning the spotlight on Cuba, saying, 'okay, it's not about us.' We are meaning to normalize. Now it is about these guys, you've got to come with us, to hold their feet to the fire. So, from a national interest perspective, and from the perspective of trying to advance freedom and democracy. In Cuba, this means taking certain steps to normalize as in move forward and make sense. The exact shape, pace, sequence of that—I think we need to carefully measure at each step along the way and decide whether this is going to help or hurt those two fundamental, underlying objectives.

One of the biggest concerns that I have heard with the media is that the Castros simply aren't rational actors, and even if we're making these steps, the leadership is still fundamentally the same as it was back during the crisis in the '60s. How would you address this?

I think it is overwhelmingly likely, with the Castro brothers, that they have no interest in fundamental change in Cuba. They have staked their entire careers on a certain system of government—a government we strongly object to, and there is no reason to believe that, late in life, they are all of a sudden going to have an altar call. But that being said, the logic here is not that if we do these nice things for Cuba, then they will do nice things for their people. That is not at all the logic. The logic is if we take advantage of openings in Cuba by allowing greater travel, greater economic investment, greater interchange, and if we take the Cuban issue off the table in our dealings with other countries in the region, that's in our fundamental self-interest and it's ultimately in the interests of the Cuban people over time. And pressure from below will begin to shape the decision of the Cuban leadership. And the Castros won't be around forever. There's going to be a next generation of leadership there, and they are going to have to face a new reality about Cuba's relationships with the United States and Cuba's role in the region.

Looking out maybe five or ten years in the future, what do you see as the major threat to the United States' national security?

I think there are a few different categories of threats. One of them is obviously the ongoing threat of violent Jihad terrorism and that is a threat that is evolving. It is in some ways diffusing into smaller and more difficult to pin down elements, so that would be one big area. The second area is the potential for further nuclear proliferation. Part of the reason we are driving so hard and front running the nuclear deal is to fundamentally preserve the non-proliferation regimes so you don't end up in arms races. The third area is cyber, where there is a lot of work to do, and the US leadership should be driving this work

on setting rules of the road for what's in bounds and what's out of bounds on the cyber front. And fourth significant issue that we simply can't wait any longer to confront and grapple is climate change, which represents a threat to everybody. And this year is a crucial year for that. There is a big meeting in Paris at the end of 2015—a goal of that meeting is to produce an agreement where every country in the world agrees to limit its carbon emissions.

President Obama, I think, has taken very positive steps on this, including the bilateral agreement with China, and what he's done on his own, through executive action, here in the United States, and I think we're going to have to have muscular and visionary diplomacy in the lead up to that to try and produce some kind of outcome. So that doesn't even begin to cut the waterfront of all the threats. You have got the potential for the return of geopolitical competition; you've got Russia. China has choices to make on how it's going to manage all its lives, and we have to keep an eye on these things. But with any luck, the US-China relationship will not be about managing differences, as much as it will be about being able to minimize these differences and to maximize cooperation. With Russia, Putin is making, I think, fundamentally bad choices—and may continue to do so. And all we can do is play the long game—strengthen our partners, strengthen ourselves, and narrow the space for him to cause mischief.

You trained Barack Obama and Clinton in debates in 2008. Do you have any tips for being a successful debater?

I wouldn't use the word 'train,' I would use 'helped them prepare.' One important thing to keep in mind when you're debating is that you've got to be able to break down the wall between you and the audience, and really talk directly to them, so the debate should be less about you going at it with your opponent, and more about you bringing in the audience. To say, 'Look, here's what's really going on,' up here, up on stage, almost like you're an actor who has broken out of character for a minute and turned to the audience to say, 'Here's what the deal is, what's really happening.' That puts you at a real advantage, not just tactically, but in terms of being able to connect to the audience so that they not only trust you, but also understand the argument that you're making. So that's one big thing that is worth focusing on.

A second thing is that policy is ultimately in pursuit of purpose. You don't just say, 'I'm for middle class tax cuts,' you have to explain to people why you're doing what you're doing—what you're in it for. So, especially in a policy debate, starting with a statement of purpose—the goal here is X, and this is the way I'm going to get there—is incredibly important. A lot of people end up skipping that step and diving right into to whatever the issue is. And so, being able to state the purpose up front is very important. So those are two tips, I charge for all the rest. I'm joking.

(Laughter) To wrap up, we'd like to ask if you have any tips for undergraduates interested in international relations or policy making.

There is no substitute for grappling with the issues in a concrete way. That means either trying to work in government in an internship where you actually get the kind of contact with reality that comes with being inside the government. Or working in a think-tank which has some proximity to government, where people are very much engaged in the policy debates, and recognizing the constraints the policymakers are facing or working on policy issues in a campaign.

Much of what happens in foreign policy, like much of what happens in domestic policy, happens in the context of politics. Not that it's politics that are driving all of the national policy, but this is democracy and in a democracy, you have to take into account public opinion. You have to take into account Congress, you have to have the sustainability of any given policy choice, and whether or not it will ultimately be repudiated by the American public. And so having some sense of that through a campaign can be a positive thing. Choosing one of those opportunities to get your feet wet and your hands a little dirty in a positive sense, I think, is a very worthy undertaking for every undergraduate, whether for the summer or right after they graduate.