From Theory to Practice: An Interview with Jake Sullivan, Dartmouth's 2019 Montgomery Fellow

Jake Sullivan is a leading American foreign policymaker and is currently a Montgomery Fellow at Dartmouth College. In the Obama Administration, he served as the National Security Advisor to the Vice President and Director of Policy Planning at the State Department. He also served as Hillary Clinton's top foreign policy adviser during her 2016 Presidential election. Among his major diplomatic achievements was his role in the Iran nuclear negotiation. He was listed in Time Magazine's "40 under 40" of rising stars in American politics and is a prolific writer and commentator on U.S. international affairs for outlets such as CNN, Foreign Policy, Foreign Affairs, The New York Times, and The Washington Post.

World Outlook: Thank you so much for being here. Our first question is about your academic background and how that informs your thinking on foreign policy. You graduated from Yale with a degree in political science before graduating from Oxford with an MPhil in international relations. Then you went on to graduate from Yale Law School, you clerked for numerous influential justices and you practiced law. So how do you think your extensive academic background has influenced your outlook on foreign policy and how do you think your legal background may have shaped your outlook on foreign policy?

Jake Sullivan: So having a grounding in political science and international relations theory I think gave me a broader strategic lens to look at the big questions facing American foreign policy and also put it in the historical context because IR, in particular the master's degree that I did in Oxford, had a deeply historical bent to it and then layered on top of that the more kind of strategic social science historical frame for thinking about policy questions I'd put a legal background and legal training and what legal training really gives you is the ability to systematically organize thoughts, arguments, [and] approaches on issues that you may not have ever encountered before. So you can get a case on some industry that you didn't know existed and as a lawyer you'd figure out "OK I know the right questions to ask, I know the right analysis to run, and I know how to get up to speed quickly on the puts and takes of that industry." Same thing goes for policy questions. So as somebody who worked in a position at the State Department and the White House where I actually had to deal with more or less every issue around the globe including countries and functional areas I'd never really touched or been exposed to before, having the legal training to be able to quickly come up to speed on those issues and being able to apply some kind of systematic approach to them was super important.

The last thing I would say on this is the best policymaking process involves people with a mix of academic backgrounds: some people who are steeped in history, some people who are steeped in the social sciences, some people who are steeped in

business and the private sector, some people in law, all leavened by actual practical real-world experience as well.

And when I reflect back on the Obama administration, I think we were too heavy on lawyers. So just to give you an example when I moved over to the White House in 2013 to be the vice president's national security adviser, I participated in what was called the PDB— the president's daily briefing—which is a small group of us in the Oval Office every morning with the president talking about issues of the day and what was on his mind from a national security perspective. And so in the room the first day I arrived for that were: Barack Obama, lawyer; Joe Biden, lawyer; Tom Donilon, who was the national security adviser, lawyer; Tony Blinken, who was the deputy national security adviser, lawyer; Lisa Monaco who was the counterterrorism and homeland security adviser, lawyer; me, lawyer; and Denis McDonough who, was the chief of staff, who is not a lawyer but was probably the most lawyerly minded person in the room, and that was it. So there are reasons for that in Democratic administrations I think which are kind of interesting but I definitely think having legal training can make you a good strategist a good foreign policy practitioner but if that's all you've got, I think the process suffers.

WO: And this one kind of moves off that a little bit but how would you describe the interaction between the academics and the applied communities of international relations? Do you think there's a lot of communication and back and forth or not really?

JS: You know when I was director of policy planning we were the interface to the intellectual realm, the realm of the mind outside of the walls of government decision making and we would bring in academics from multiple different perspectives to give their assessment and critique of the work we were doing but also to try to place the day to day policy decisions in a larger context—theoretical, historical, etc..

But that was probably the exception more than the rule. There is more limited engagement and interaction between the academy and the practitioner set than there should be and that's both true for process reasons—when you're working in government you're suffering under the tyranny of the inbox, things are just coming at you constantly every day and you're trying to deal with them so it's hard to step back and have that kind of sustained engagement with people in the academy. And it's more when practitioners go out like I have gone out and that you get the opportunity to really immerse yourself in the academic debates. But there's another reason too which is in international relations and foreign policy—this is much less true of the Dartmouth government department than government and political science and art departments and a lot of other institutions—the emphasis tends in the academy to be much more on restraint, offshore balancing, realism, sort of grand unified theories of IR, whereas practitioners are more likely to be pro engagement with the world, more forward

leaning but also less like the hedgehog and more like the fox, you know, more just trying to deal with whatever is before them in the best way they think they can. And so, there is a little bit of a Mars–Venus quality between academics and practitioners.

I don't want to overstate that because I think we ought to be building greater bridges and that should happen on both sides, that the academy should be more focused on how it can participate in these debates and practitioners should be more focused on how they can draw out the brilliance and the insights of academics who know a heck of a lot more about some of these subjects than the practitioners do.

WO: One follow up to that, because we are an academic journal: what steps do you think you can take to be more engaged in the international arena and policy decisions?

JS: Well I mean one thing is it's what is valued among students at every level, Undergraduates, Master's students, PhDs. To what extent is the demand signal from the key leaders, and I know it's not a hierarchy, but prominent voices in the academy for, yes excellent academic research, but also a participation in and contribution to big policy debates. And I actually think we're in a moment right now where if the pendulum kind of swings back and forth between the applied and the theoretical it's coming back a bit and you're seeing more and the IR field more younger, dynamic voices and more diverse voices that are doing both excellent scholarship but also are trying to contribute to the public debates. That's a good thing. And so a lot of that just has to do with the incentives—institutional and structural—and the disincentives that get set up for young scholars. And I would just encourage even more movement in the direction of—obviously I'm biased—but more movement in the direction of, not sacrificing on the methodology or the scholarship, but carving out the time and space to contribute to these debates. The other thing is, I don't know if you guys are familiar with the Monkey Cage blog in The Washington Post, but it's worth checking out because it basically exists to provide scholars with an outlet to turn like a twelve thousand word multi-regression analysis into an 800 word op-ed that can get very broadly read and that can have real kind of policy impact and I think more mechanisms like that where there's a conversion of intense brilliant scholarship that is accessible only to those who have the tools to be able to really understand it into an argument that those of us who are more kind of knuckle dragging practitioners really understand, and the public too.

WO: You played a prominent role in American foreign policy towards Syria and Libya among other countries. How do you see the role and effect of American intervention in today's day and age?

JS: I think it's tough. I wrote a piece in The Atlantic a few months ago in which I make the observation that the biggest shortcoming of American foreign policy generally but

especially in respect to intervention is the gap between our stated objectives and the means we use to achieve them. So Syria is a great case in point where we said "Assad must go, there needs to be a transition to a new democratic Syria," and that means that we were prepared to apply or even really could have applied even if we had wanted to were not up to achieving that objective. And so, when people presented the argument to President Obama "let's do some limited military action here," he would say "How is that limited military action going to get me to this objective that you've said is the paramount objective." And he would be right about that. So, I do believe that there are circumstances in which American military intervention to prevent genocide, mass atrocities, and industrial scale horror is appropriate. But I think it has to be humbly and modestly applied towards a narrowly tailored objective not the transformation of another country that we don't understand that well into something fundamentally different.

Another good case in point on this is Libya. I've struggled with the question of if we had it to do over again would we have participated in the Libya intervention. And I don't have a definitive answer on that yet. I go back and forth but where I think I'm landing, subject to change, is that it was right actually to get that U.N. Security Council resolution and to defend Benghazi against the possibility of mass killings and mass atrocities in Benghazi as the Gadhafi regime was threatening them. But maybe we should have stopped there which is to say just the narrow goal of essentially protecting a major population center from being overrun and then forced the parties to figure out how they were going to come to some agreement for the future of Libya rather than spend months in what effectively turned into a regime change mission. So a more limited intervention in Libya might have accomplished the purposes of stopping mass killings with international sanction, with the U.N. Security Council resolution, but going on to essentially shatter the Libyan state and leave it to be rebuilt or not as has the case turned out, maybe that was where we went too far.

WO: You were heavily involved in the process of negotiating the Iran nuclear deal. What was that like? How do you approach the negotiation table in such a high stakes situation? What misconceptions do you think there were about the deal back here in the United States?

JS: Well the first thing that I would say is diplomacy is almost by definition the pursuit of imperfect outcomes. If you get everything you want and the other side gets nothing they want, that's not a diplomatic negotiation, that's surrender.

And so one of the things that I have always chafed at is this assertion that critics of the deal make which is we should have just gotten a better deal because I hear that and I think to myself sort of jokingly, "Oh a better deal, I didn't think of that, I only thought our options were this deal and a worse deal, if only I had conceived of the possibility of a better deal. Well of course we would have gone and gotten that, you know."

I say that kind of glibly, but the point I'm making is when you're sitting at the table in this context of imperfect outcomes, you have to decide at some point not did we get everything we want, but did we get what we need and is it the most we're going to get. And there is no mathematical formula for that. That's kind of a judgment call. And how do you know for sure if you should wait and push harder, or demand more, or what exactly the other side is prepared to give. You're feeling your way to that and it's incredibly improvisational and therefore for someone like me who likes to dot the i's and cross the t's, it's somewhat unsatisfactory as an exercise. It's a deeply human exercise and any diplomatic deal can be subject to the charge you should have done better. So that's one big thing.

The second big thing is that you really have to be able to put yourself in the other person's shoes not to sympathize with their perspective but to have some empathy for it. So I can think, and I do, that the current regime in Iran badly mistreats its people, supports chaos and violence and terrorism across the region, and is at odds with values I hold very dearly. But at the same time, I can have a clear-eyed view of how they see their nuclear program in the context of their national security strategy, and then you figure it out from there. It can't just be all ideology and all bluster and all kind of one-way transmission. And I think as Americans we tend not to be as good at being able to put ourselves in other people's shoes because we have a kind of "gee whiz" problem solving rationalist approach to all this stuff partly born of the fact that we've been more protected, wealthier, more sheltered than most other countries have been in modern geopolitics.

Our natural attitude is like, "Come on, get over it, just do it," rather than saying why is it you feel this way and what's driving your position. And I've learned a lot in the Iran deal about being able to occupy the other person's perspective and have that inform the way that we approach the strategy of negotiating.

WO: Looking at how the U.S. and the globe as a whole is becoming more interdependent, do you see this as leading to more or less conflict?

JS: I think both are possible. I mean the U.S.–China relationship is one good example of this. More interdependence raises the importance of various forms of cooperation: on climate change or epidemics or terrorism.

And so it creates incentives to find a way to have a floor under the relationship, but more interdependence can also breed more mistrust. So, the Huawei 5G debate is all about is their stuff going to be in our country in ways that are going to undermine our security. And so actually managing interdependence so that you keep separation where necessary and integration where it's effective, that's a hard thing, that's a balance you have to strike. And then more broadly more interdependence means you can create more common cause and common identity across borders and boundaries. But it also means that malign forces have more capacity to hold us all at risk whether it's terrorist

groups or cyber criminals or other nation states and more interdependence means the Russians can interfere in our election in a more effective way than maybe they could during the Soviet days. So it's not an unalloyed good or an unalloyed bad. It is a background condition of international relations that requires careful stewardship.

WO: In the class that you're currently teaching, you had your students write a memo as an assignment about China. I assume that your personal views informed your decision to ask for this coursework. So, what do you think about how China views the international order?

JS: I don't know to be completely honest with you. I'm actually working on a piece right now about my view of the U.S.–China relationship and one of the points that I'm trying to make in it is we have to build a strategy against a background of qualified ignorance. Which is to say it is possible as Hillary Clinton said yesterday in some of our classes that China is in domination mode both regionally and globally. That's possible. That's totally possible. I find when people make that argument that they have some credible basis to make it. It is also possible that China wants its due and wants to exercise a certain amount of leverage and influence but is not seeking to supplant the United States as the main provider of global public goods and does not want to step into the U.S.'s shoes globally. That's also possible. So, we need a strategy that allows us to flexibly adapt to either of those potential possibilities as more information becomes available to us over time. The other thing is in this qualified ignorance space it's possible that China is on an inexorable path to developed country status with ever increasing growth and technological innovation and strong political control. And it's also possible that it all falls apart very badly and catastrophically. And our strategy also has to be able to account for both of those possibilities without predicting with certitude which of the two are going to happen because we don't know.

The bottom line is that I worry more about the risk that we fulfill a self–fulfilling prophecy that China's out to get us, with all that that entails—the confrontation and potential conflict—than I worry about the risk that we hold open the possibility of coexistence in a more benign relationship and it turns out we were wrong.

Both of those are risks, but I think the risk of the self-fulfilling prophecy is a greater risk to the United States and it could end putting us into a completely self-defeating cycle that ends us up worse off ends the Chinese up worse off and ends up the rest of the world worse off. So, I am more in the mode of clear-eyed coexistence with China and finding a modus vivendi that kind of works for everyone. But ten years from now, China gets a vote in that and China may not want that, and we have to be prepared to adapt to an alternative reality.

WO: Throughout multiple points in this discussion, you've alluded to very broad theoretical concepts that seem to inform some elements of specific, day-to-day decisions. I understand that this is a broad and general question, but—how do theoretical ideas apply to your decision-making process?

JS: Well just to give you an example on the point I was making about putting yourself in the other person's shoes, like how does that actually play out in practice. So early on in the in the bilateral negotiations with the Iranians in Oman, I started pressing the Iranian side on what I thought was a fundamental deep inconsistency in their whole approach to the nuclear issue which was the whole thing made no economic sense. They're sitting on a massive reservoir of oil and gas and they're pouring billions of dollars into developing nuclear power. I mean this is not a country that has cared deeply about climate change, so what gives with that? And even if they were going to decide to go from a gas-powered electricity grid to a nuclear-powered electricity grid, you can go on the market and buy a nuclear power plant from a known supplier and not spend billions of dollars. This would be like you building your washing machine from scratch rather than going down to Maytag and getting it.

I put this to them, I was like what gives here. You know this is why we think you want nuclear weapons not a civilian nuclear program. And their answer was interesting, they said, 'How much did you guys spend on the space program in the 60s, the Apollo program to go to the moon?' And I was like "I don't know." And they said, "Would you agree it's probably in today's dollars billions of dollars?" And I said, "Yeah I mean sure probably is." "So you spent billions of dollars to build rockets to go to the moon and what economic sense did that make? You got some moon rocks and some tang out of it or whatever, but not a lot else."

And they said that that was their view—mastering the nuclear fuel cycle being able to enrich uranium is joining the Big Kids Club. They didn't use that phrase but it's a narrative of national scientific achievement and it matters to our people, it's a source of pride. We did this, self-sufficiency; we did it on our own, we did it against the pressures of the imperialist powers and so forth and it matters to us.

And I heard that and I thought, you know, we do caricature all of this. Do I believe that Iran was pursuing this in order to have the option to get a nuclear weapon? Absolutely I do and we have, I think, rock solid evidence to show that there was a weapons-based purpose to this program, so I'm not saying that didn't exist, but there was a second purpose too that was not a pure lie. Which was this idea that had become suffused through the population of Iran that now the nuclear program matters for another reason too which is "It's ours and we did it and we have scientific greatness as a result of it." And if you don't understand that as a nuclear negotiator, and I think a lot of Americans don't understand that, it just becomes a lot

harder to figure out how you're going to get to a solution. So that's an example of where in the real world probing and trying to figure out what is actually the motivation here and there can be multiple motivations at once as I think there are in respect to Iran's nuclear program actually has a direct bearing on your ability then to say "OK we'll start from that baseline and now we're trying to get to a deal."

WO: How would you describe your experience here at Dartmouth as a Montgomery fellow?

Oh, it's been awesome. I've really enjoyed teaching both because it has forced me to think more rigorously about the hard questions I'm grappling with and because when I cover a given subject and I hear the responses of students and the questions from students that also triggers additional thinking so it's a huge benefit to me in that respect. And then getting to engage with this incredible array of faculty. Part of being Montgomery fellow you have these dinners where you'll have someone who's an expert in Japanese horror film sitting next to someone who is an expert on HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis and trying to eradicate it next to somebody who has just finished a six-hour snowshoe through the white mountains and is an expert in astronomy. And that can all be just one dinner; and the synapses that start firing as a result of those kinds of interactions, it's just sort of not something that you can get going in almost any other context. Additionally, I grew up in Minnesota, so I also like these kinds of winters a lot, and I love skiing. So that's that was great too. And now [in the spring,] it's just beautiful.

WO: Going off that, what questions or ideas, if any, have you been playing with that you maybe would've had chance [to] if you were in DC or the applied world just because of you being around these academics or students?

JS: Well I'm teaching a class this term called the future of the international order. And, it can be frustrating at times I think because it's asking such fundamental questions for which there often aren't really good answers, it's more just kind of teeing up the questions. But even that exercise of going from the impact of great power competition to the impact of technology to the impact of particular functional areas like climate change, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, changes in the global trade and financial system, marching through that over the course of 10 weeks with all the readings that come behind it and the discussions and the preparation is like running a policy process of sorts—a grand strategic policy process—that also involves interaction with a bunch of other brains who are coming at it a little more fresh obviously than I am but have their own perspectives and thoughts on it that kind of surface tensions and hard questions and the like. And I can't think of many other ways to get that done that would be as effective or as interactive or as fun because there's a human dimension to it, you're engaging with other human beings rather than just sitting there and kind of working it out all by yourself.

WO: And so do you have any advice for undergraduates who are interested in pursuing a career in the field of international relations after graduation, and how can they make most of their undergraduate experience with that mind?

JS: I guess I'd say three pieces of advice. The first is find mentors, one thing that gave me opportunities were from college internships, people I worked for. I worked for someone at the Council on Foreign Relations a decade before I started doing foreign policy with Hillary Clinton and he was the reason, through a few different connections, that I ended up getting that job. And that's not to say just think "network." Because if all you care about is, "I got make this relationship to get that thing," you'll get found out and there's going to be a ceiling on your success. But if you invest in relationships with people you're really passionate about learning from, not only will you become better and smarter and more capable, but those people will be your champions in positive ways. That's the first thing. The second thing is, before making a decision about graduate school of any kind, actually use the years after college to explore and experiment and do the kinds of things that ten, twenty years later become a lot harder for you to do. Go to a country you're passionate about and work there. Go work on an issue that you really care about with an organization that maybe you don't think you're going to have a career in, but heck this would be just an awesome opportunity. Take the time before making further decisions. A lot of people are in a rush and I promise you nobody hits 40 and looks back and is like "Man I wish I'd gotten into law school or grad school a lot faster." They think why didn't I take three more years in my early 20s and a) have fun but b) really stretch my limits.

And then the third thing is that it's really important to decide which aspect of international relations really motivates or inspires you. It's a broad umbrella. Going into intelligence is very different from going into diplomacy, is very different from going into defense, is very different from going into advocacy in a nongovernmental organization. And I'm not saying you should pick a silo and just stay in it your career, by no means, crossing over those I think actually makes for a better career. But kind of thinking about where your main thrust is going to be in reflecting on that what moves you is an important thing to explore early on because it will tell you a lot about both what you think you're good at and what you're passionate about. So those would be some pieces of advice.