

# US Elections 2020: A Who's Who of Joe Biden's Foreign Policy Team

By [Umar A Farooq](#)

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*Democratic nominee's advisers consist of many former Obama-era officials, some who helped craft the Iran nuclear deal, drone strikes programmes and sanctions on Syria and Libya*

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As a two-term vice-president under President Barack Obama, Joe Biden played a leading role in the US's often contradictory policies concerning Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Syria and Libya.

So ever since the former Delaware senator announced his decision to run for president in April 2019, it's no surprise that the 77-year-old has been rather coy over his foreign policy plans should he win the race for the White House.

Trying to strike a balance between some Democrats who crave a resumption of Obama-era policies and a new wave of progressives who want to correct the party's glaring failures in the Middle East, the campaign has been quiet over how it plans to address major foreign policy challenges in the region.

Biden has said he plans to pursue drastically different positions from President Donald Trump, pledging to reassess US-Saudi relations and re-enter the Iran nuclear deal. But how does he plan to go about it? There are few details offered by his campaign team.

Biden's critics say that throughout his political career he has appeared to lack an overarching vision for foreign policy and has instead proposed ad hoc solutions to problems as they arise.

In 2003 when he was chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, he [voted](#) for the invasion of Iraq. Then in 2007 Biden opposed the surge in troops as the country descended into civil war.

Robert Gates, a life-long Republican who served as Obama's first defence secretary, wrote a [scathing review](#) of the White House hopeful in his 2014 memoir, saying "he has been wrong on nearly every major foreign policy and national security issue over the past four decades".

Heading into the 2020 election, Gates's damning assessment has raised an awkward question: would Biden's foreign policy be any better than that of Trump?

In an attempt to lay out his worldview to undecided voters, Biden [wrote an article](#) in Foreign Affairs earlier this year stating:

“The Biden foreign policy agenda will place the United States back at the head of the table, in a position to work with its allies and partners to mobilize collective action on global threats.”

“As a nation, we have to prove to the world that the United States is prepared to lead again.”

As Foreign Policy magazine noted in July, his campaign has assembled a team of more than 2,000 informal foreign policy and national security advisors, including 20 working groups.

The progressive wing of the Democratic Party has slammed the massive foreign policy team, calling for advisers to be brought in that don’t “have a track record” for “disastrous military interventions”.

“It is time to reject a foreign policy based on patronage of authoritarians, regime change, failed military interventions and world policing,” an open letter signed by 400 delegates from the Democratic National Convention said.

“The people of the United States are tired of squandering our resources on perpetual war and occupation that result in carnage, breed global resentment and drain our treasury of funds needed to address environmental sustainability, health care, housing and education at home.”

Middle East Eye reached out to several of the people who have been officially or unofficially offering advice to Biden’s campaign for this story, but many did not respond to requests for comment.

Mildred Elizabeth Sanders, a professor of government and foreign affairs at Cornell University, said that if elected it was unclear if Biden would forgo policies of regime change, drone strikes in the Middle East and supporting autocrats.

“So far, aside from the Paris agreement, there isn’t much evidence of a foreign policy conversion among Biden and his advisers,” Sanders told Middle East Eye. “We can only hope.”

Here’s a who’s who of Biden’s foreign policy advisers:

Antony Blinken

Biden’s foremost foreign policy aide is Antony Blinken, who worked for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and has been at the former vice president’s side for nearly two decades.

Blinken was an adviser to Biden in 2002 when as a Delaware senator he voted for the Iraq war, a decision that has cast a dark shadow over Biden’s track record on foreign policy.

Later, he joined Biden in the White House where he served as deputy national security adviser for Obama.

Washington insiders have speculated that if Biden gets elected, Blinken would probably hold one of the administration’s senior positions, either as secretary of state or as national

security adviser.

In recent months, the 52-year-old has repeatedly spoken to the media about Iran, stressing that Washington wouldn't re-enter the 2015 Iran nuclear deal until Tehran returns to compliance.

"Iran would have to come back into full compliance and unless until it did, obviously, all sanctions would remain in place."

He has also reiterated the campaign's pro-Israel stance, [denouncing](#) the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement which seeks to pressure Israel through non-violent means to end its abuses against Palestinians.

"You've probably heard the vice president say this. He opposes any effort to delegitimise or unfairly single out Israel, whether it's at the United Nations or through the BDS movement."

Jake Sullivan

Jake Sullivan served as national security adviser to Biden and [helped establish back-channel talks](#) with Iran that led to the Iran nuclear deal. Sullivan later became a protégé of Hillary Clinton during her failed presidential campaign in 2016.

Since Trump walked away from the Iran nuclear deal, the 43-year-old has been an advocate for returning to the accord but also lessening the US's military footprint in the Middle East.

In an [article](#) in Foreign Affairs, Sullivan said that the US under a Biden administration should reestablish nuclear diplomacy with Iran, as doing so is the only way to reduce tensions and allow for withdrawing troops from the region.

"In choosing to abrogate the nuclear deal and bring the United States to the edge of war with Iran, Trump all but guaranteed that whatever his rhetoric on endless wars, the US presence would become even more heavily militarized.

"A new administration should aim to test the opposite premise: whether by restoring nuclear diplomacy, lowering regional tensions, and forging new arrangements, it can manage the Iranian challenge with fewer forces in the region."

According to the [Jerusalem Post](#), Sullivan's role goes beyond Iran by playing a role in shaping the Democratic Party's foreign policy platform after being appointed in January by Democratic National Committee chairman Tom Perez.

Colin Kahl

Colin Kahl previously served as Biden's national security adviser and is now serving as an informal adviser to his campaign.

While he has become the go-to person for the campaign on issues related to Iran, he has also been outspoken on the issue of arms sales to Gulf Arab countries.

He told the [Financial Times](#) earlier this year that a Biden administration would scrutinise all arms sales to partners in the region, saying both Saudi Arabia and the UAE had lost a lot of friends on Capitol Hill.

“Both Saudi Arabia and especially the UAE are sufficiently pragmatic to understand that they have to recalibrate their policies, or they very much run a risk of losing bipartisan support,” he said.

#### Elizabeth Rosenberg

Elizabeth Rosenberg served as a senior adviser at the Treasury Department under Obama and is now giving “outside informal counsel exclusively to the Biden campaign for President”, [according to her bio](#) for the Center for a New American Security (CNAS).

During her tenure at the White House, she pushed for the implementation of sanctions on Iran, Syria and Libya.

In a paper she co-authored for the CNAS in 2016, which was written as a guide for the new president to follow, Rosenberg [aggressively pushed for sanctions](#) on Iran, while also lifting others under the 2015 nuclear deal.

#### Avril Haines

Avril Haines is a former deputy director of the CIA and is expected to lead the foreign policy side of Biden’s transition team if he wins.

Her appointment by the campaign caused a split between liberals and progressives in the party.

Haines helped craft Obama’s policies on drone warfare as well as the administration’s tough approach to North Korea which Biden has promised to revive.

She is praised by liberals who point out that she promoted restricting the administration’s drone campaign and also advocated for the release of Guantanamo detainees. Still, she was responsible for crafting the contentious drone policy alongside former CIA director John Brennan, which led to the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians.

Others note that she helped redact the Senate Torture Report and spared CIA employees for spying on Senate torture investigators. She also supported Gina Haspel for CIA director. Haspel had been directly implicated in the infamous torture programme.

#### Michele Flournoy

Michele Flournoy, who served as undersecretary of defence for policy in the Obama administration, has emerged as a possible secretary of defence if Biden gets elected.

She was widely thought to be Hillary Clinton’s pick for secretary of defence in 2016 and remains a likely pick in a Biden administration.

“The next five years will be pivotal for US national security,” Flournoy wrote in an op-ed that she co-authored last month for the Defense One website.

"The coronavirus pandemic lays bare the fragility of our health security," she wrote.

"Climate change threatens generations of Americans. We must build a new American foreign policy fitted to the global challenges we face."

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*Featured image: Colin Kahl (L), Antony Blinken (C), and Michele Flournoy are all advisers to Biden's presidential campaign (AFP/File photo)*

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