

A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

Revisiting America's Greatest 20th Century Diplomat in the 21st Century

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INTERVIEW WITH JAKE SULLIVAN

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Editors: We wanted to start with some questions about your time as Policy Planning director. Perhaps we could begin with the agenda that you brought to the job.

Jake Sullivan: I was the director of Policy Planning from February of 2011—following the departure of Anne-Marie Slaughter, who was my immediate predecessor (she returned to Princeton)—until February of 2013, when I left the job a couple of weeks into Secretary Kerry’s tenure as secretary of state. I stayed on past the end of Secretary Clinton’s time just to provide a transitional phase and to support Secretary Kerry as he got up and running.

In terms of the main issue areas where I tried to drive the priority agenda of the policy planning staff, I would identify three. The first was what we called economic statecraft, which essentially was both sides of the coin of how economics and national security interact. So on the one hand, how to use economic tools to advance national security objectives; and then, on the other hand, how to use national security tools to advance America’s domestic economic objectives.

I had a number of members of my staff working on different angles of that broad agenda, trying to figure out (a), how the State Department itself could bring economics more to the center of its activities; and (b), how the U.S. government as a whole could be better organized to practice effective economic statecraft—especially at a time

when power is increasingly measured and exercised in economic terms and many of our main adversaries are much further along in integrating the economic dimensions into their grand strategy. That was one.

The second was how to give content to and more granular conceptual shape to the Asia-Pacific “pivot” or “rebalance.” So I worked closely with members of my team and Kurt Campbell, who was the assistant secretary for East Asia, on a seminal article Secretary Clinton wrote in 2011 called “America’s Pacific Century.” And then that led to a number of more tailored initiatives, including the work that Policy Planning did to support the opening to Burma/Myanmar and related projects.

The third was more of an inbox issue. It was how to think about the potential risks and opportunities of the Arab revolutions, which were unfolding right at the moment that I took the job on. And what was interesting about the time horizon on that particular set of activities was the U.S. government was operating day-to-day, hour-to-hour. And so for policy planning, mid-range to long range-planning became a week out, a month out, a year out rather than 5–10–25 years, as we were just trying to stay one step ahead and think through, you know, what all this meant, where it was all headed, and how the United States should respond.

Those were some of the main areas where I tried to bring a new thrust or perspective to the overall agenda of the policy planning staff.

E: If you were to step back and think about what that office had been, what it was meant to be, what it could be, how did you feel the mission fit the substance of what you set out to do? What is your sense of the ways in which Kennan shaped the office and its mission?

JS: Well, the threshold question for any Policy Planning director is

how do you implement the very simple directive that Secretary Marshall gave to George Kennan, which was to avoid trivia.

That is, in many ways, a piercing charge to be given. In other ways, it's a confounding charge because of course it leaves a huge space open for discretion to figure out: okay, in trying to look at the bigger picture, in lifting your head up above the smoke, as Marshall put it, and trying to see out to the horizon how do you (a) choose the issues and the relevant timeframes and (b) how do you then connect any of the work you're doing to decisions that policymakers are actually taking in the here and now—decisions around budget, decisions around priority, decisions around strategic choices in a particular region or a particular functional issue?

I think I, like every Policy Planning director from Kennan on forward, was faced with the really considerable challenge of how to actually think about making this office effective, both in helping the policy-making and decision-making apparatus look out beyond the immediate inbox, but also in doing so in a way that wasn't just interesting or academic but could be actionable in a meaningful way.

For me, I probably put more emphasis on having Policy Planning be a connecting node between the secretary of state and her priorities and the bureaus and embassies of the United States Department of State spread across the world. And I mean a connecting node traveling in both directions. So how to translate to the secretary what we were learning and hearing from the bureaus and the embassies in terms of their assessment of what was going on, what opportunities there were, what risk factors there were. And then I tried to communicate from the secretary down what her priorities were and how she hoped they would be implemented.

One of the things that really struck me when I took the job was that unlike the Pentagon—where there's something called Secretary's Policy Guidance where the secretary of defense is constantly firing off missives to the broader DOD bureaucracy saying, "Here's a

decision. I want it implemented. Here's a priority. I want it elevated. Here's a theme. I want it filled out and executed on in practical ways"—the State Department didn't do that at all.

One of the things I tried to bring to the job was to create a process for Secretary's Policy Guidance at the State Department. Hillary Clinton cared deeply about women and girls and wanted gender to be integrated into diplomacy. What did that actually mean? And how could an ambassador understand what he or she should be doing with that? Same with energy diplomacy. Same with, as I mentioned before, the Asia-Pacific rebalance, etc.

I think that is because of the way that the Department has grown and decision-making has changed from the Marshall-Kennan days, where it really was concentrated in a few people with a much more linear reporting relationship and much easier communication up and down the line.

Now, it's become so far-flung, so atomized in terms of the way that decisions are processed and then put out for implementation, that the job of Policy Planning director increasingly, in my view, has to be to serve in a substance role, first and foremost, but also a pretty important process role.

To the extent that was true for Kennan, I think it really frustrated him. He didn't like having to manage his way through the process. And I understand why, having done it myself for a couple of years. But it's so vital because if you don't have an effective process for translating priorities into policy, then the tenure of the secretary, the person to whom you report, is going to be significantly less effective.

The other big thing that I will say about the job is that in Kennan's time, the Policy Planning staff was the hub for the entire United States government when it came to foreign affairs strategic planning—period. In my time, the Policy Planning staff was one of several policy planning staffs spread across the government, including one

headquartered at the National Security Council.

The State Department itself was just one of more than a dozen cabinet agencies that saw itself as deeply involved in the advancement of America's foreign affairs mission. The Agriculture Department, the Department of Homeland Security, the Justice Department, the Energy Department, and on down the line, the Treasury Department, all had substantial elements of their bureaucracy devoted to foreign affairs and foreign policy.

Policy Planning at State suggested a division in responsibility and authority. But it also created a much more significant need for someone in that role to figure out: how do you try to bring some order to the long-term strategic outlook and planning across this very crowded space?

That was another aspect of the job that both bedeviled and energized me, and I put a lot of time into thinking about how could I help contribute to the entire American ship of state getting pointed in a direction toward the destination. Again, that meant the importance of process in addition to substantive strategic thinking. What are the priorities? What are the actual substantive answers?

E: Over time, the U.S. government became larger and more complicated, and that mandates a different role for policy planning. But the challenges have also shifted from the time George Marshall planned for the Second World War and Kennan planned for the Cold War. Did the end of the Cold War make the job of policy planning more difficult? Was it more difficult to establish clear priorities?

JS: At one point I wrote a memo for both the secretary and ultimately for the president while I was director of Policy Planning on the future of the Middle East. In that memo, I started by noting, a bit wryly, that Kennan had it easy because as Policy Planning director, and previously when he wrote "The Long Telegram," he started from a very simple premise. Which was: I can tell you how this story

ends. This story ends with the contradictions of the Soviet Union becoming increasingly exposed to its own people, and eventually those contradictions are going to doom the Soviet system.

And so that is the foundation for containment, his saying, “that’s where this is all headed—now we need a strategy that gets us from here to there.” That protects America’s interests and pushes back against Soviet expansionism but in a sense helps create the conditions for that result to unfold. He couldn’t say the timing or anything else, but he could say, “here’s where we’re going to end up and therefore here’s the prescription for how to get us from here to there.”

When it came to the Middle East, we couldn’t say, “okay here’s where it’s going to end up. So now let’s talk about getting from here to there.” There was immense dispute and debate about where it was going to end up.

That’s just one of many examples—to answer your question about the end of the Cold War—of how a conceptually simpler (still incredibly difficult but conceptually simpler) landscape for foreign policy and grand strategic decision-making lent itself to cleaner, sharper, more sustainable and durable strategies like containment. They were cleaner, sharper, and more sustainable compared to the messy, contingent, uncertain, and also incredibly varied landscape of the post-Cold War era, where not only did you have the continuation of geopolitical competition, but you had the rising strategic threat of terrorism and you had a series of transnational issues that required overcoming complex collective action problems and the mix of competition and cooperation and your adversary sometimes also being your partner.

This was the landscape we were dealing with in the post-Cold War era. I know that every Policy Planning director likes to say that his or her period was the most difficult, the most challenging, the most vexing period that there ever was. But in the case of the recent Poli-

cy Planning directors, I'm going to say, I'm going to go out on a limb and say it was actually true. We had it harder. I'm sort of joking about that but only sort of joking.

E: For the post-Cold War United States, we think you accurately describe a problem set that is both diverse and in flux. Given the array of vital interests the United States has had in this period, does the Marshall injunction to avoid trivia have meaning any longer? Is there a way to operationalize it or is policy planning yet another inbox-driven government entity where you're drinking from a firehose all the time?

JS: It has a tendency towards that, and I certainly fell prey to that, particularly being dual-hatted in the secretary's personal office and running the Policy Planning staff. I spent a fair amount of time on the road traveling with her, where I would get trapped by the tyranny of the inbox, with my team and my staff interested in helping solve those immediate problems as well.

There was a bureaucratic physics tending in that direction. But I would argue that the necessity of heeding Marshall's plea to the best extent possible, to avoid trivia, has only gone up as the speed and complexity and interconnectedness of these challenges has accelerated. Why? Because it's much harder now to figure out: what is the main thing? What are the priorities that the United States really should be investing in rather than going and chasing every rabbit, running out there across every continent on every issue under the sun?

It was easier in an earlier time, in a bipolar world, in a Cold War world, to know what the main thing was. And then you had to work through: what does that mean for the actual development and implementation of policy? But you had a sense of the big picture.

Now it's different. What is the ultimate thrust of America's foreign policy today? What are we trying to accomplish and why? Before you

even get to the “how.” If you’re not wrestling with that question in a systematic way, then you’re ultimately letting down the secretary and the president because you will get carried along by events.

And I can’t give myself an A grade on being able to do that as Policy Planning director. I don’t know any Policy Planning director in recent memory who would because it’s so hard. We are all struggling with long-term thinking. But we need to get better at it. We really do.

E: We’re also consuming a lot more news and information from more sources than we would have been 50 to 60 years ago.

JS: The advent of email has been disruptive to sound, sober, durable, strategic decision-making because it creates a rhythm and a tempo and a mode, an operating style, that is much more tactical and reactive and doesn’t leave time for people to step back and ask big, hard, conceptual questions that allow one to hang a frame around America’s foreign policy choices.

E: There may be other significant powers in the world which nonetheless have a narrower aperture for foreign policy planning. We would suggest that Russia is one of them. Do you think that’s true? Does Moscow, for example, have an easier job of setting foreign policy strategy?

JS: Let me say two things about that. The first is that Russia, China, other actors who operate in one way or another as revisionist actors—they have one massive advantage over the United States and that is: they are not the United States. They are relying upon the U.S. as the burden-bearer of last resort, as the main security broker in key regions. And they’re playing off against that.

And playing off against that kind of actor is just an easier game to play because you don’t have to face any of the contradictions or tensions nearly as squarely.

So just as an example, the Russians can be friends with the Iranians

and the Saudis, the Kurds, the Turks, and the Iraqis. They can bring the Sunni opposition groups and also sit down and talk to Hezbollah. And why is that? It's because they're not—no one's ultimately counting on them to produce outcomes as a broker, you know. They're a backer of Assad and so forth and the Saudis want to pull them away. But fundamentally, it is the presence of the United States that allows Russia to play that kind of role. If the U.S. disappeared tomorrow and Russia were thrust into a similar role, Moscow's job of policy planning and strategy would get a heck of a lot harder because they would have to deal with the contradictions and tensions that we're forced to struggle with on a regular basis. So that's one thing that's quite different.

Secondly, the United States has gotten less effective at strategy over the decades because we have been so rich and so powerful that effective strategy was not vital to us in achieving what we needed to achieve. Weaker states cannot simply throw resources and large numbers of friends and allies at the problem; they have to invest more in effective strategies to be able to get what we want.

And just to give you an example of this: a rich person who needs to get a loaf of bread doesn't have to be particularly strategic, does not have to be a strategic genius to get a loaf of bread. They go to their wallet, they take out money, and they go buy the bread. A poor person who has no money has to develop a strategy go to get that bread. Has to come up with, by hook or by crook, some way of getting their hand on that bread.

And that analogy to me says a lot about why I think there has been some atrophy in the strategic muscle memory of the United States, because our way of thinking about strategy is ends-ways-means. You know, we have the ways and the means. So we define the ends and then just put the ways and the means to work to get to those ends.

We are now entering a much more competitive phase where to maintain a competitive edge strategy is going to matter a whole lot more to the United States. I think we're going to have to get better at it as a strategic community. That's the second thing. And that says Russia relies more on strategy to get what it needs because of its relatively weaker position. The United States has not had to rely on it as much.

Even so, I view Russia in particular as having more of a tactical opportunistic approach to its strategy than some kind of coherent, comprehensive game plan that it is going out and executing on a daily basis. I think Putin gets more credit for being a strategic genius than he deserves. I think he has nerve and gumption and is willing to move fast and seize opportunities when they present themselves, but I think there's a lot more improvisation in what the Russians are up to than the conventional wisdom would suggest.

E: You've already recited from "The Long Telegram." Kennan's approach was to ask questions about, as he put it, "the sources of Soviet conduct" or the nature of the regime. These were questions that he answered through political analysis but also through reflections on history and literature. Was that approach was still active in your time as Policy Planning director? Or was it better to take another approach? This is a Russia question, but there might be other countries that come into play in this regard.

JS: There were two big priority areas for my time as director: where the Middle East was headed and this whole issue of economic statecraft. Digging into the academic literature and the history and talking to a lot of people who have looked at these questions not as policymakers but as historians or as theoreticians or as anthropologists—that was an important part of what we did. And my staff really dug in methodologically to the social sciences, to the history, to the theory, and then tried to generate papers that would be informed by all of that but not weighed down by it to the point where they be-

came irrelevant to ultimate decision-makers. But that was an important factor.

The other thing is we tried to integrate intelligence analysis as well into what we did. We tried to really use the tools especially that the State Department uniquely had through the INR Bureau—the Intelligence, Analysis, and Research Bureau—to think about: okay, how do you actually take all of the intelligence products of the United States intelligence community which are amassed and not just have them inform the decision of the next deputy’s committee meeting but have them paint a picture for you of what you’re up against and really try to think about how to make the best use out of the NIC [National Intelligence Council], the DNI [Director of National Intelligence], the agency [the CIA], and especially the State Department’s own intelligence arm.

So methodologically that’s how we approached things. And I have to say, on some issues it made us more effective, and on others it made us less effective, to be bringing a quasi-academic approach to some of the work that we did. I feel that on economic statecraft we produced a series of papers and secretary speeches that I actually think stand up really well if you go back and look at them in terms of what they suggested the United States should be doing. But they don’t stand up as well in terms of actually producing a change in U.S. policy or the orientation of our various foreign policy interests in economics questions. And that’s because they just were a little too abstract.

And that, you know, became one of the major balancing acts of being director of Policy Planning was how do you make sure that what you’re doing is not just the same thing everyone else is doing in government in terms of the policymaking process—that it has a deeper, a more contextual flavor to it. But on the other hand, to make it relevant and concrete enough that it could actually be used to shape decision-making.

Looking back at Kennan's thought process reveals a huge challenge: how to stay true to what it was that made him so good while at the same time make sure that the Policy Planning staff's products were actually really useful and guided policy. That was one of the things that frustrated him as he came to the end of his tenure.

E: You mention Kennan's frustrations, and we think from his vantage point he lost a lot of bureaucratic and policy battles. Even if some of his ideas that were adopted were not adopted in ways that he would have approved; containment is one example.

JS: Right.

E: We're curious about any sort of proposals that you made that went to the side of policy or that weren't enacted in the way you wanted them to be.

JS: First of all, nothing on the order of containment. I can tell you that. Nothing of the sweeping magnitude of the debates and fights that they were having. But I would say that we really gamely tried to make the case for some pretty meaningful shifts in the way that the United States practiced economic statecraft.

And some examples included creating a development finance institution, which the United States does not have but most of our major partners and competitors do—the Germans, the British, the Chinese, etc. Like thinking about the use of American economic leverage beyond financial sanctions and how to have a more systematic approach to that. Like thinking about how to integrate domestic economic policy priorities and questions with the way we thought about foreign economic policy priorities and questions. And those tended to be two very distinct conversations.

There were a number of different proposals being made in this regard that encountered a considerable amount of resistance from the economic agencies in the U.S. government, from some quarters in

the White House as well, but more often it wasn't so much that they encountered resistance as they encountered the problem that this was not the here and now. This was not the issue du jour, or it didn't present an inbox question.

That was frustrating to me because I think the U.S. continues to really lag in terms of being able to compete effectively on a global battlefield—not battlefield—on a global field of economic leverage. And the Chinese are leaps and bounds ahead of us on this. Now, they have certain advantages we don't have, but we have advantages, too. And that is a big area.

There are other things I'm proud of. We—the Policy Planning staff—worked very closely with Ben Rhodes at the White House and others on a set of papers around an opening to Cuba. If you go back and look at these papers from years before the opening to Cuba ever happened, they really laid out the roadmap to where we ultimately got.

In my time as head of Policy Planning, we did yeoman's work on Iran nuclear issues. And while the pivot and rebalance has not ended up in the way I would have hoped it would, it certainly got off to a really good start. And Policy Planning deserves a bit of credit for that.

So there are things I'm proud of, but also things that we really worked hard on that didn't really get us very far. And of course I think that's too bad, but that's just in the nature of the job.

E: We think you pithily captured the problem and solution proposed in “The Long Telegram”: wait for the internal contradictions of the Soviet system to bring it down and in the meantime contain the bad stuff the Soviet Union might do. If you were to advise on the content of a “Long Telegram” for today on Russia, what do you think the key elements of that would be?

JS: That is a great question and I'm going to give you a pass-

ing-grade answer but probably not something that's going to get honors. That's spoken as someone who's in the middle of grading final exams right now.

So number one, I think going back to what I was saying before about how Kennan got to his assessment of where the Soviet Union was headed and what the United States needed to do about it. He began really with the question of what to make of this country and what its mindset is and where it was headed. And I think we have to start in the same place with modern day Russia.

And for me, Vladimir Putin, who has consolidated and concentrated power in his own person, needs to be understood as having an overriding interest in preserving and extending his own power, first and foremost; secondly, in restoring the role and relevance of Russia on the global stage; and third, in ensuring, as a defensive proposition—which ends up having very offensive elements to it—that Russia is secure in its near abroad and has dominion in one way or another over the former Soviet space.

Starting from that perspective, that that's what's driving Putin and therefore what's driving his decision-making. One should understand his effort to divide and weaken NATO and the European Union, his effort to discredit democracy as an effective form of government, his effort to split the Transatlantic Alliance, all in the context of those goals—being able to say to his people: see, what we're doing here makes more sense than that totally messy democracy that's not working. That allows him to extend that defensive perimeter because he's weakening the effectiveness of European and American push-back, etc.

I think that our basic goal with Russia has to be that (a) we make it clear to Putin that we actually mean what we say with the Article Five guarantee, that we put skin in the game as we did in the latter years of the Obama administration by actually having boots on the ground in the Baltics and Poland and other places. And (b) that we

figure out a more effective and sustainable way to raise the cost to him for his continued disruption of democratic systems and efforts to weaken and divide the West.

But (c) that we offer him a path to some form of uneasy coexistence. There's never going to be the friendship one might have hoped for in the 1990s and 2000s but the relationship can be more durable, sustainable, and certainly de-escalated from where it is right now.

We should try to do this through an integrated, strategic conversation at the highest level. I think it's very hard with Donald Trump, who just doesn't think in these terms. But if you had a different president, who sat with his senior security team and Vladimir Putin with his, I do think that you could work out a modus vivendi between the United States, our European partners, and Russia that would be more durable, and would involve, to a certain extent, making it clear to Putin that while we will never back off of our values and we will always stand up and speak out on human rights, we're not in the business of trying to bring him down. Because I think that is one of the aspects of this that has become so destabilizing.

That's a 30,000-foot way of thinking about this, but fundamentally I think we have to say to Putin: we're not going to accept a notion of just a flat-out sphere of influence, but we're also going to try to understand your defensive interests in your own near abroad. That we say to him: we are not going to stand silent in the face of abuses of human rights, but we're also not in the regime-change business in Russia. That's for you and the people of Russia to work through.

And to say: here's what's going to happen to you if you continue down the path that you're on. These are the kinds of steps that we are going to be prepared to take in a predictable and consistent way that are going to impose very real costs on Putin and Russia if they keep going in this direction.

That would be how I would think about managing that relationship.

And you know, I'll just finish with an anecdote. Bill Burns and I were meeting with Sergei Ryabkov, the deputy foreign minister, in the context of the Iran negotiation, and we had to convince him that Russia should join us in the approach to the Iranians on a particular issue related to inspections and verification. And we convinced him, you know, we got him on board.

And then as we were leaving the room, we also had to say, by the way, today we just imposed sanctions on Ukraine. Thank you very much for your help on Iran.

And that anecdote goes to show you that there are issues on which we are going to have to continue to work with the Russians, including not just bilateral issues in our relationship like strategic stability but external issues like Iran and its nuclear program, even as we engage in this more competitive and adversarial dynamic that I've just described.

We have to be mature and sober about how we effectively manage the elements of cooperation and the elements of competition and pushback and not at any point turn our backs on the kind of core proposition of who we are, what values we stand for, who our friends are, and how we're going to stand up for them.