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Foreign Policy in the U.S. Democratic Party Primaries

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The course of the Democratic Party primaries for the 2020 presidential election has highlighted the internal division within the party into a centrist faction and a more leftist-progressive wing. In foreign policy, the candidates agree on the role that NATO plays in deterring Russia and pursuing U.S. security interests. In other areas, such as trade policy, some positions are similar to the approach pursued by the Trump administration.

The first party primary, the Iowa caucuses, will take place on 3 February 2020. With 15 candidates still seeking the party's nomination, four have been at the top of the polls for several months—Joe Biden, the former U.S. vice president and senator from Delaware, Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Bernie Sanders, senator from Vermont and Hillary Clinton's main contestant in the 2016 Democratic primary battle, and Elizabeth Warren, a senator from Massachusetts. So far, five debates have taken place, during which the candidates discussed climate policy and migration issues, both global issues directly affecting the U.S. The importance of foreign policy in the debates intensified with [the start of the impeachment inquiry into U.S. President Donald Trump](#).

In the 2018 midterm congressional election, among the 235 seats obtained by the Democrats in the House of Representatives, progressive politicians held 96 of them. [The strengthening of the progressive forces has changed the Democratic Party's approach to major issues and introduced more leftist concepts](#). Although these concern mainly social issues, the changes in the party also influence the shape of the primary debate concerning foreign policy.

In general, the candidates are assumed to hold opposite views to Trump administration policy but they are not able to effectively distinguish themselves in all areas, which is particularly evident in trade policy. Among the leading candidates, Sanders and Warren present the most progressive position. Biden, the only one with experience in conducting foreign policy, is the establishment candidate, clearly among the party elite, and holding centrist views. Buttigieg has similar views but is not identified with the establishment, coming from a relatively small Midwest city. For Biden and Buttigieg, foreign policy is one of the key areas of the campaign.

Views on NATO and U.S. security policy. The Democratic candidates agree that NATO serves U.S. security interests but want allies to increase their defence spending. According to Biden, the Alliance is the “core of collective security” and the foundation that enables the U.S. to pursue its security policy around the world. Warren has argued that undermining NATO's credibility is beneficial for Russia, so the member states must strengthen cooperation. A similar opinion was expressed by Buttigieg, who emphasized the importance of rebuilding relations with European allies. He also pointed to the important role that NATO plays in deterring Russia in Europe. Biden, Buttigieg, and Warren's comments comprise elements of broader criticism of Trump, who, according to the Democrats, has unnecessarily antagonised U.S. allies. Sanders has been the only one of the top candidates to express sceptical opinions about NATO, openly opposing

Alliance plans for enlargement, which he believes could exacerbate relations with Russia. During the 2015 campaign, Sanders pointed to the need to increase NATO cooperation with Russia and the League of Arab States.

The candidates presented their concepts regarding U.S. armed forces' foreign presence in reference to Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria. Biden described the decision as "the most shameful thing any president has done in modern history (...) in terms of foreign policy". Buttigieg recognised it as harmful for the Kurds, who had supported the U.S. in Syria, but decried party establishment and media calls for maintaining a presence in Syria as support for "endless wars". According to Sanders, Trump's decision is a signal to U.S. allies that it is no longer credible. Warren said the U.S. "should withdraw troops from the Middle East" (Syria and Afghanistan), limiting her criticism of Trump's decision. Nevertheless, Buttigieg, Sanders, and Warren agree on limiting the U.S. military presence in the Middle East while only Biden favours maintaining a significant military presence in the region (however, he wants to further reduce involvement in Afghanistan, which Trump is also seeking). At the same time, Sanders and Warren are calling for a radical reduction in the U.S. defence budget to finance other projects such as universal healthcare.

Approach to Russia. Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election has affected Democrats' perception of the country and bilateral relations. The candidates criticise Trump's approach to Russia, which in practise is generally positive towards Vladimir Putin. The administration's actual Russia policy, sometimes conditioned by Congress, is firm. Therefore, the candidates have not criticized certain actions, such as the expulsion of Russian diplomats and the imposition of sanctions in response to the attempted assassination of former GRU agent Sergei Skripal in the UK or the U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty after repeated violations by Russia (only Warren has stated she considers it a mistake). However, they are also cautious about direct criticism of Russia, fearing a negative escalation in relations that might benefit them now but which might later hinder the development of U.S.-Russia relations in the event they win.

Trade Policy. The Democratic candidates reject a purely liberal approach to trade policy and would make it dependent on the state of the country's economy. This is the result of the progressive wing's influence on party activities. One example is the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and ratification of a new agreement between the U.S., Mexico and Canada (USMCA). Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi believes that the USMCA (pending ratification) may in the future serve as a model for new trade agreements. The process initiated by Trump is also in line with the withdrawal of the U.S. from other multilateral free trade agreements, which the progressives also back. Therefore, Warren and Sanders are not criticising the administration's compensation for losses resulting from, for example, theft of intellectual property, by China or the tightening of trade relations with the EU. This is demonstrated by Sanders' support for the decision to withdraw the U.S. from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Warren's nod to Trump's declaration regarding the imposition of additional tariffs on Canada and the EU. Biden and Buttigieg hold a different view. Without questioning the current trade policy towards China, they have been critical of imposing tariffs on the EU, describing it as an example of the deterioration of transatlantic relations.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The Democratic candidates hold similar views to the Trump administration regarding trade policy and the calls for NATO allies to increase defence spending. This may mean a continuation of these policy elements under a Democratic president, but with a significant relaxation of Trump's rhetoric. To distinguish themselves from the president in the primaries, the Democratic candidates will be more eager to debate U.S. foreign policy directions in which they clearly disagree with him. These concern primarily the change in U.S. policy towards Israel (the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, [recognition of Israeli control over the Golan Heights, and acceptance of the expansion of settlements in disputed territories](#)), [discontinuation of the isolation policy and undertaking a dialogue with North Korea](#) to denuclearise it, and the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia and military support for it in the war in Yemen despite Congressional opposition. The candidates have declared their willingness to completely change the U.S. approach to these countries. However, for them to reverse Trump foreign policy and return to the status quo at the end of the Obama administration may prove impossible because of the leftward swing in the electorate inside the party. All depends on which candidate wins the nomination and ultimately, the November general election.

The rejection of a liberal approach to trade policy and the calls for fewer U.S. troops abroad puts the progressives on a similar page as the incumbent president, although they have raised these issues long before his election. Sanders and Warren's declarations they would reduce defence spending may also include the part of the budget allocated for foreign operations, including U.S. military presence in the Middle East and the rotation of forces to Europe.