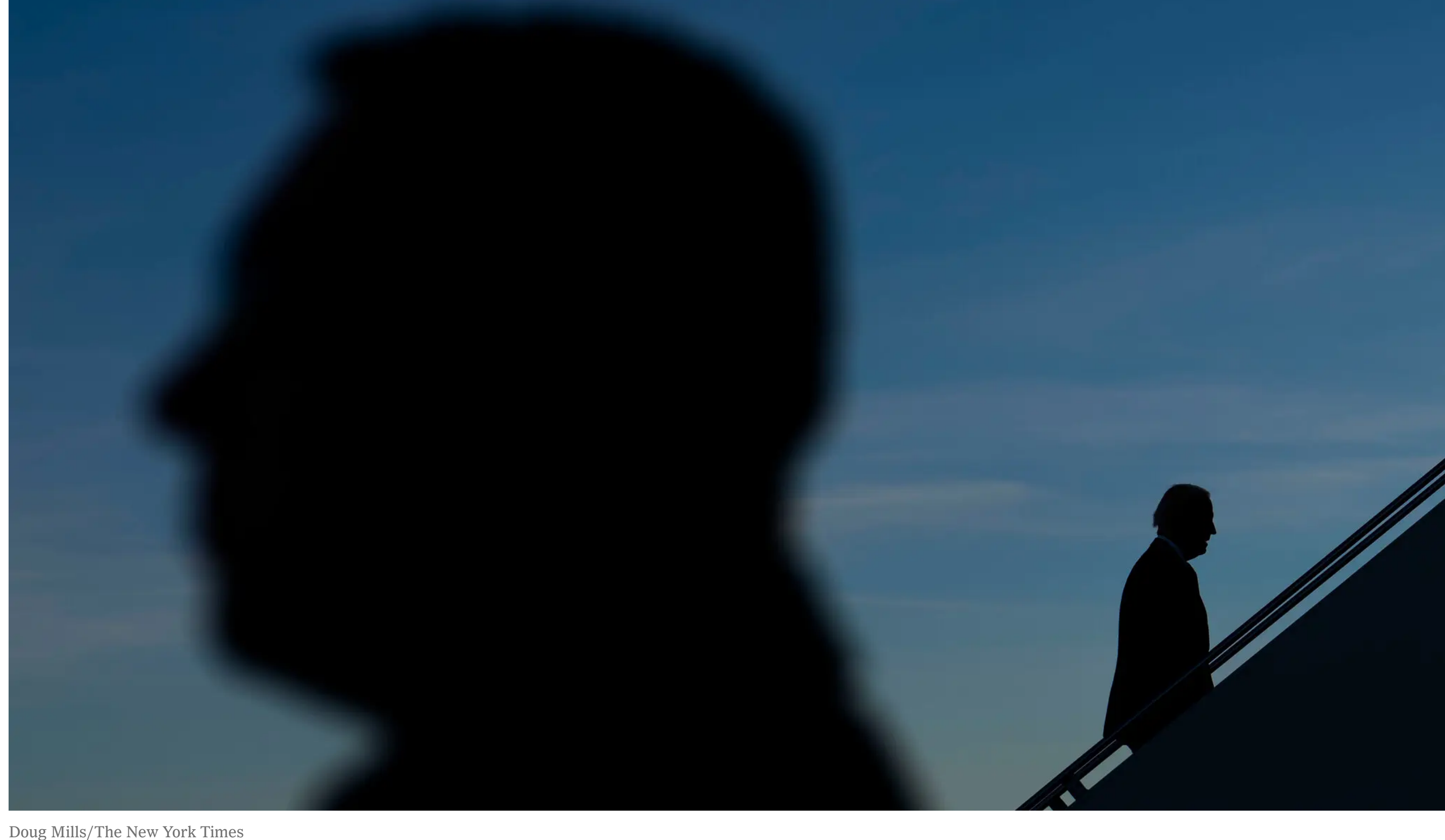


OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Imagine if Another Bernie Sanders Challenges Joe Biden

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To understand why progressives should challenge Joe Biden in the upcoming Democratic presidential primary, remember what happened during the last one.

When Bernie Sanders exited the 2020 race — after winning [more than 1,000 delegates](#) — he cashed in his votes for public policy clout. Mr. Sanders's supporters joined Mr. Biden's allies in [working groups](#) that crafted a common [agenda](#) on the economy, education, health care, criminal justice, immigration and climate change. From those task forces came what Barack Obama [called](#) “the most progressive platform of any major-party nominee in history.” And that progressivism continued into Mr. Biden's presidency. One hundred days after he took office, *The New York Times* [concluded](#) that he had “moved leftward with his party, and early in his tenure is driving the biggest expansion of American government in decades.”

By challenging him from the left, Mr. Sanders didn't only change Mr. Biden's candidacy. He also made him a better president. But only on domestic policy. There was no joint working group specifically devoted to foreign affairs — and it shows. With rare exceptions, Mr. Biden hasn't challenged the hawkish conventional wisdom that permeates Washington; he's embodied it. He's largely ignored progressives, who, polls suggest, want a fundamentally different approach to the world. And he'll keep ignoring them until a challenger turns progressive discontent into votes.

Take China. America's new cold war against Beijing may enjoy bipartisan support in Washington, but it doesn't enjoy bipartisan support in the United States. According to an [April Pew Research Center poll](#), only 27 percent of Democrats see China as an enemy — roughly half the figure among Republicans. In a December 2021 Chicago Council [survey](#), two-thirds of Republicans — but less than four in 10 Democrats — described limiting China's global influence as a very important foreign policy goal.

Grass-roots Democratic voters [dislike](#) the government in Beijing. But they oppose a new cold war for two key reasons. First, their top foreign policy priorities — according to an [April Morning Consult poll](#) — are combating climate change and preventing another pandemic. Treating China as an enemy undermines both. Second, they [oppose higher military spending](#), which a new cold war makes all but inevitable.

But the Biden administration isn't listening. When Secretary of State Antony Blinken outlined the administration's China policy in a [speech](#) last May, it took him 38 minutes to even mention climate or public health. As the Brookings Institution [detailed](#) last November, the growing animosity between the United States and China “pushes solutions to global challenges such as climate change, pandemic crises and nuclear proliferation farther out of reach.”

Mr. Biden isn't listening to ordinary Democrats on military spending, either. In March, he [proposed](#) lavishing more on defense, adjusted for inflation, than the United States did at the height of the last Cold War.

China is not the only place where Mr. Biden's policies more closely resemble Donald Trump's than those desired by his party's base. Despite [polls](#) early in Mr. Biden's presidency showing that almost three-quarters of Democrats wanted him to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal that Mr. Trump exited, Mr. Biden refused to sign an executive order doing that. He instead [made additional demands](#) on Tehran, which prompted negotiations that squandered the final months of President Hassan Rouhani's relatively moderate government. By the summer of 2021, Iran had a hard-line president, which made reviving the deal nearly impossible. Now Tehran is on the verge of being able to build a nuclear bomb.

A similar pattern characterizes Mr. Biden's policy toward Cuba. When President Obama opened relations with the island, ordinary Democrats [applauded](#). Then Mr. Trump reimposed sanctions, many of which Mr. Biden has kept. In so doing, according to Ben Rhodes, Mr. Obama's former deputy national security adviser, Mr. Biden has [chosen](#) to “legitimize what Trump did by continuing it.”

Mr. Biden has [mimicked](#) his predecessor on Israel, too. Mr. Trump closed America's consulate in East Jerusalem, which served the largely Palestinian half of the city. It remains closed. Mr. Trump shuttered the Palestine Liberation Organization's office in Washington, the closest thing that Palestinians had to an embassy. It's still shut. And despite [polls](#) showing that more Democrats now sympathize with the Palestinians than with Israel, the Biden administration will [not even investigate](#) whether Israel's use of American weapons to abuse Palestinian human rights violates U.S. law.

There are exceptions to this pattern. Grass-roots Democrats [generally support](#) the administration's Ukraine policy, which has [twinning support](#) for Kyiv with efforts to avoid direct confrontation with Moscow. And Mr. Biden fulfilled a progressive demand by withdrawing troops from Afghanistan — although that commendable decision now looks less like an effort to restrain American militarism than to redirect it toward China.

Overall, however, Mr. Biden's foreign policy has been more hawkish than Mr. Obama's, even as his domestic policy has been more progressive. Only a 2024 primary challenge offers any hope of changing that.

Long before Bernie Sanders ran for president, progressives had a long history of using primary challenges to convey their frustration with Democratic Party elites. By winning 42 percent of the vote in the 1968 New Hampshire primary, Eugene McCarthy exposed dissatisfaction with Lyndon Johnson's war in Vietnam. In 2004, Howard Dean did something similar when he almost upset a Democratic field composed largely of legislators who had voted to invade Iraq. And although they both lost, Mr. McCarthy and Mr. Dean each laid the groundwork for antiwar candidates — George McGovern in 1972 and Barack Obama in 2008 — who won the Democratic nomination four years later.

Foreign policy doesn't motivate voters today in the way it did when American troops were dying in Vietnam and Iraq. But an outsider candidate need not do as well as Mr. McCarthy or Mr. Dean to show the Biden foreign policy team that it's out of step with the party's base.

And that challenger would enjoy other advantages. Close to half of Democratic voters [think](#) Mr. Biden should not run again, which makes him vulnerable to a challenger who mobilizes ideological discontent. That doesn't mean a challenger would undermine Mr. Biden's chances in the general election. Democrats — including supporters of Mr. Sanders's insurgency — turned out for him in November 2020 because they were terrified of a Republican in the White House. They remain terrified today. Given the disillusionment with American military intervention coursing through the Trump-era G.O.P., a less confrontational foreign policy might even attract some on the political right.

A primary opponent would risk the Democratic establishment's wrath. But he or she could put into circulation ideas that won't otherwise get a hearing in official Washington: a joint U.S.-China [initiative](#) to support green energy in the developing world, a ban on U.S. policymakers cashing in with [weapons makers](#) and [foreign governments](#) once they leave office, the repeal of sanctions that [immiserate](#) ordinary people while entrenching rather than dislodging repressive regimes.

Mr. Biden's presidency has a split personality. On domestic policy, he's been the most progressive president since Lyndon Johnson. But on Israel, Cuba and Iran, he's continued some of Mr. Trump's dumbest and cruelest policies. On China, he's leading the United States into a cold war that imperils public health, ecological survival and global peace. Next year's election offers the best chance to make him change course. But only if some enterprising progressive puts foreign policy on the ballot.

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