

Bernie Sanders backs Biden's national security cabinet

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It is not a secret to readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* that Senator Bernie Sanders is a fervent defender of American imperialism. His claims to be a “democratic socialist” notwithstanding, the Vermont senator’s foreign policy views have nothing to do with genuine socialism, which is based on internationalism, the fight to unite the world working class against the capitalist system.

In his campaigns for the Democratic presidential nomination, Sanders generally confined his criticisms of rivals to domestic policy, while embracing the foreign policy consensus of the Democratic establishment.

In his first presidential campaign, in 2015-2016, when asked about whether anti-terrorism policies of a Sanders administration would include the use of Special Forces and drone missiles (i.e., kidnapping and assassination), he replied, “All that and more.”

In his 2020 campaign, he hailed the US armed forces as “the best military in the world,” criticized Trump for overly friendly talks with North Korea—but not for his militaristic threats against Venezuela and Iran—and endorsed US military retaliation if China was to attack Taiwan, a response that could lead to nuclear war.

After both campaigns fell short of the nomination, he folded his tent and embraced more conventionally right-wing defenders of US militarism: former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2016, and former Vice President Joe Biden, the one-time chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in 2020.

Throughout his three-decade career in Congress, Sanders has been a reliable supporter of imperialist foreign policy, backing the US-NATO bombing of Serbia, the US invasion of Afghanistan, and the funding of US military operations all over the globe. Despite his nominal “independence,” he backed every

twist and turn of the Democratic Obama administration in the Middle East and Afghanistan, called for the prosecution of whistleblower Edward Snowden, who exposed global US spying, and endorsed the CIA-backed fascist putsch in Ukraine, which installed a right-wing anti-Russian regime.

Under the Trump administration, Sanders embraced the anti-Russia campaign mounted by the Democratic Party establishment, sections of the military-intelligence apparatus, and much of the corporate media, which sought to channel popular opposition to Trump in a rightward direction, into support for a more confrontational US policy toward Moscow.

While presenting himself in the 2020 primary campaign as the most consistent opponent of the US war in Iraq, Sanders nonetheless indicated his support for preemptive military strikes against Iran and North Korea.

This foul history is generally covered up by the pseudo-left apologists for Sanders, like Socialist Alternative and the Democratic Socialists of America. But under the new Democratic Party administration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, the alignment of Sanders with American imperialist foreign policy is becoming harder and harder to conceal.

It is worth noting the votes Sanders has cast over the past week to confirm Biden’s nominees for the key positions in the national security apparatus. On Tuesday, Sanders joined all 50 Democrats in confirming Antony Blinken as secretary of state. A majority of Republicans backed Blinken as well, giving him a 78-22 margin.

Last week, Sanders was one of the 50 Democrats who joined 43 Republicans in confirming retired General Lloyd Austin as secretary of defense. There was also a unanimous Democratic vote to confirm Avril Haines as

director of national intelligence, the top spy post, with only 10 Republicans in opposition.

Sanders actually staked out a position to the right of many of his Democratic colleagues in a roll call vote that preceded the confirmation of Austin. That was on a resolution to waive the legal requirement a military officer be retired for at least seven years before assuming the top civilian job in the Pentagon. Fourteen Democrats opposed the waiver, but not Sanders.

This requirement was enacted 70 years ago to reinforce civilian control of the military. It was violated for the first time by Donald Trump, who sought a waiver to name retired General James (Mad Dog) Mattis as secretary of defense in 2017. A number of Democrats agreed to the waiver then, making two arguments: that Mattis would be an “adult in the room” and exercise restraint on Trump’s foreign policy decisions; and that this was a one-time-only exemption that they would never repeat.

No such arguments can be made this time around. Biden is clearly not a foreign policy novice, and there is no claim that General Austin, retired only four years, is an indispensable figure from that standpoint. Instead, the argument was based on identity politics, and the importance of the first African-American military chief, with the added urgency of putting a Biden loyalist into the Pentagon in the wake of the January 6 fascist coup attempt, which was aided by the reluctance of Trump’s Pentagon lackeys to send national guard troops in response to urgent pleading from the Capitol Police.

Sanders voted against the waiver for Mattis but for the waiver for Austin. In other words, he favors civilian control of the military under a Republican administration but is prepared to dispense with it when the commander-in-chief is a Democrat. So much for his “independence” from the capitalist two-party system.

On Wednesday afternoon, the newly confirmed Secretary of State Blinken gave his first press briefing at the State Department. His remarks demonstrated the high degree of continuity between the foreign policy of the Trump administration and that of Biden. Blinken praised the “Abraham Accords” (the Trump-brokered recognition of Israel by several Arab monarchies) and said the new administration hoped to build on them. These agreements have involved US bribery of bloodstained regimes like Morocco, whose seizure of the former Spanish Sahara was recognized in return for

its rapprochement with Israel.

Blinken announced that the Biden administration was retaining Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as the US representative in talks with the Afghan government and the Taliban, so that he could “continue the vital work he’s carrying out.” Khalilzad is one of the neo-conservative architects of the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and has served as a US pro-consul in Afghanistan for much of the past two decades.

In response to a question from NBC’s Andrea Mitchell, Blinken emphasized a more confrontational position towards Russia, involving such provocations as the claims that Moscow had poisoned right-wing opposition figure Alexei Navalny, and the completely concocted charges of Russian “bounties” to Taliban fighters for killing US soldiers in Afghanistan.

One day after Sanders cast his vote to confirm Blinken, the new secretary of state showcased the Biden approach to foreign policy: a low-key presentation of highly belligerent and inflammatory measures, including endorsing the outgoing Trump administration’s charge that China is engaged in “genocide” against the Uighur population of Xinjiang. He made no such charge in relation to Yemen, where Saudi Arabia is engaged in systematic starvation of the population to back its invasion of the country, merely suggesting that the Biden administration didn’t want to “get in the way of humanitarian assistance.”



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