



# TEXAS NATIONAL SECURITY REVIEW

## **POLICY ROUNDTABLE:**

# **THE FUTURE OF PROGRESSIVE FOREIGN POLICY**

*December 4, 2018*

### Table of Contents

1. “Prompt Essay: Wagering on a Progressive Versus Liberal Theory of National Security,” by Van Jackson
2. “Back to Basics: The Core Goals a ‘Progressive’ Foreign Policy Must Address,” by Heather Hurlburt
3. “Principles for a Progressive Defense Policy,” by Adam Mount
4. “Progressives Should Embrace the Politics of Defense,” by Loren DeJonge Schulman
5. “The Free-World Strategy Progressives Need,” by Thomas Wright

# 1. Wagering on a Progressive versus Liberal Theory of National Security

*By Van Jackson*

Progressives are in search of a collective voice on foreign policy and national security.<sup>1</sup> As one senior democratic Senate staffer confided to me over the summer, “I keep asking, ‘What is a progressive national security policy? Are we a bunch of progressives on education, healthcare, etc., who happen to do foreign policy and it should look the same no matter who’s in charge? Or do we have a distinctly progressive outlook on the world that we’re trying to implement as practitioners?’” Until recently, the left has been unable to reliably answer these questions and it’s understandable why.

For one thing, the progressive movement is intellectually diverse. Self-identified progressives range from committed socialists to left-leaning neoliberals and — at the extreme edges of the movement — both hardcore pacifists and anti-fascist militants. Progressives have considerable differences of opinion about capitalism, using force to achieve political ends, and America’s role in the world.

In general, the progressive voice has also historically been muted when it comes to foreign policy, which has partly to do with its modest resourcing and representation. Since the Cold War, the Democratic Party has been captured by the politics of “third way” liberalism.<sup>2</sup> At home, it vacillated between Roosevelt-era, New Deal-style social welfare politics and an alliance with unfettered capitalism, increasingly favoring the latter over time. Abroad, the “third way” amounted to sustaining the once taken-for-granted and now much-contested “liberal international order” — essentially a foreign policy premised on U.S. military

---

<sup>1</sup> Van Jackson, “Is the Left Ready to Handle National Security?” *Politico Magazine*, Sept. 11, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/09/11/left-national-security-foreign-policy-donald-trump-219744>; Aziz Rana, “The Left’s Missing Foreign Policy,” *n+1*, March 8, 2018, <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/the-lefts-missing-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview, see Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way and Its Critics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000).

superiority underwriting a series of global institutional, economic, and human rights commitments. At most, these “third way” positions only ever partly reflected the priorities of political progressives.

The left’s chronic under-representation within the Democratic Party extends to its presence in the “ideas industry” as well.<sup>3</sup> Authentically progressive ideas are scarce in the Washington think tank landscape, and progressive mega-donors tend to finance domestic policies and projects, not foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

Constrained in all these ways, progressives have failed to articulate their own “theory of security” — a term of art referring to *how* their preferred pattern of foreign policy decisions defines and realizes U.S. interests. The lack of one, as *Vox* reporter Zach Beauchamp concluded, has meant that “foreign policy debate tends to be conducted between the center and the right.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the inadequacies of U.S. foreign policy traditions may exist *because* progressives have a history of rarely showing up analytically to foreign policy fights.

But while these limitations have prevented the left from cohering around a clear theory of progressive national security, it’s possible to tease one out of the progressive worldview all the same, and that progressive vision partially accommodates America’s default position of liberal internationalism: Regional balances of power and alliances still matter, and there is a role for both the U.S. military and international institutions. But the progressive theory of security also makes its own analytical wagers, requiring alterations in key areas of the national security agenda — namely re-scoping the size and shape of the U.S. military, emphasizing political and democratic alliances, rebalancing how international institutions work, and pursuing mutual threat reduction where circumstances allow.

---

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Drezner, *The Ideas Industry: How Pessimists, Partisans, and Plutocrats Are Transforming the Marketplace of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Zack Beauchamp, “Why Democrats Have No Foreign Policy Ideas,” *Vox*, Sept. 7, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/5/16220054/democrats-foreign-policy-think-tanks>.

<sup>5</sup> Beauchamp, “[Why Democrats Have No Foreign Policy Ideas](#).”

## Saving Liberal Internationalism from Itself

America's traditional theory of security consists in a mix of realist and neoliberal beliefs: military superiority, alliances, economic interdependence through global capitalism, and international institutions to legitimate and sustain the entire enterprise.<sup>6</sup> By pursuing *all* of the above — it's typically conceived of as a package deal — the United States is able to keep open a stable international trading system, maintain balances of power in key regions of the world, and minimize the prospect of arms races and interstate wars.<sup>7</sup> Democrats and Republicans have assigned greater or lesser weight to different elements within this formula, but both parties have upheld the basic meta strategy over time.

Progressive principles are not entirely hostile to this theory of security. Despite its intellectual diversity, the progressive movement has a common core emphasizing the pursuit of a more just world through democracy, greater economic equality, and human rights protections, as well as opposition to imperialism and authoritarianism.<sup>8</sup> Progressives are also conditional advocates for the rule of law and international institutions. As leftist author Michael Walzer has argued, "We still need global regulation by social-democratic versions of the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization..."<sup>9</sup> More controversially, there are strongly ingrained biases against the military in some quarters of the left.<sup>10</sup> "Anti-militarism" is an emotionally loaded and imprecise term, but it translates into inherent skepticism about the value of both military spending and the use of force abroad. Taken together, these principled positions and attitudes logically require alterations to America's longstanding theory of security, but not a wholesale rejection of it.

---

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Friedman Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "The Liberal Order Is More than a Myth" *Foreign Affairs*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-07-31/liberal-order-more-myth>.

<sup>7</sup> Lissner and Rapp-Hooper, "The Liberal Order is More Than a Myth"; G. John Ikenberry, "End of the Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 7–23, <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/94/1/7/4762691>.

<sup>8</sup> The most thorough statement on progressive foreign policy comes from Michael Walzer, *A Foreign Policy for the Left* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Walzer, *A Foreign Policy for the Left*, 48.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Bessner, "What Does Ocasio-Cortez Think about the South China Sea?" *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/17/opinion/democratic-party-cortez-foreign-policy.html>.

*From Military Superiority to Military Sufficiency*

The traditional realist foundation of U.S. national security has been military superiority — ensuring the U.S. military can “deter or defeat all potential future adversaries.”<sup>11</sup> This theory presumes that the capability to prevail in any plausible conflict is necessary for the United States to make credible threats against adversaries and credible reassurances to allies.<sup>12</sup> Military superiority also sustains regional balances of power, ensuring that no other state in Asia, Europe, or the Middle East can exercise hegemony or control of their region.

Even in a progressive government disinclined to call on the Pentagon to solve problems, the U.S. military will need to be capable of projecting power into key regions, making credible threats, and achieving political objectives with force and minimal casualties if called on to do so. But a force structure sufficient to meet these purposes might be achieved without the endlessly increasing requirements of military superiority. A standard of military sufficiency — as opposed to superiority — is both analytically plausible and more morally congruent with progressive principles for several reasons.

First, the U.S. military is traditionally sized to win in temporally overlapping wars in different regions, but the Pentagon’s force planners have assumed very little help from local allies in those fights — this fact is obvious from the massive size of the U.S. military. Yet, looking across the globe today, there is no plausible conflict that would ensnare only (or even primarily) the United States. And in any case, progressives have a consistent track record of opposing unilateral wars of choice. Second, the idea that it takes military superiority to prevent other states from dominating their regions involves some dubious assumptions about the ability of military power to prevent other countries from exercising international political influence. Stopping others from controlling a region does not mean the United States must be able to exercise regional control itself.

As such, there is a case for making America’s security more entwined — not less — with the security of regions of interest by making U.S. force structure more networked with trusted

---

<sup>11</sup> Van Jackson, “American Military Superiority and the Pacific Primacy Myth,” *Survival* 60, no. 2 (2018): 123, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1448578>.

<sup>12</sup> Jackson, “[American Military Superiority and the Pacific Primacy Myth](#).”

allies and partners. This could meaningfully reduce the defense budget, and the only real risk it would entail is in the assumption that friends will provide significant contributions to a fight involving U.S. forces. It also potentially makes the dirty business of war a more democratic and less imperious endeavor by wagering that “multilateralizing” force structure to a degree tamps down on the tendency to opt into ill-advised conflicts. Military sufficiency potentially ties the hands of future presidents, making them less able to launch unilateral wars, and simultaneously increases the likelihood that any conflict involving large numbers of U.S. troops will be multilateral and cooperative. It would also benefit the analytical claim — which some on the left already make<sup>13</sup> — that the world is less dangerous than the Pentagon supposes, implying that a posture of military sufficiency would not hazard any great geopolitical risks.

### *Preserving Democratic Alliances*

In liberal internationalism, alliances are a means by which the United States deters aggression against its allies. They also make it possible for the United States to reliably project military power into key regions, and serve as a unique means of exerting influence in world politics. Not only do alliances act as mechanisms of risk management by controlling the aggression of allies under threat, they have also been a means of preventing nuclear proliferation.<sup>14</sup> The default theory of security bets that these advantages of alliances far outweigh the calculable downsides.

Progressive principles are not necessarily at odds with the traditional reasons for the United States upholding military alliances. In fact, a wide range of progressive thinkers writing on foreign policy have also endorsed sustaining U.S. alliances,<sup>15</sup> though with some

---

<sup>13</sup> Bessner, “[What Does Ocasio-Cortez Think About the South China Sea?](#)”

<sup>14</sup> Michael Beckley, “The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts,” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 7–48, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/myth-entangling-alliances-reassessing-security-risks-us-defense-pacts>; Victor Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Bernie Sanders, “A New Authoritarian Axis Demands a Progressive Front,” *Guardian*, Sept. 13, 2018, [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/ng-interactive/2018/sep/13/bernie-sanders-international-progressive-front?CMP=tw\\_twt\\_b-usopinion\\_c-us%3FCMP%3Dshare\\_btn\\_fb](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/ng-interactive/2018/sep/13/bernie-sanders-international-progressive-front?CMP=tw_twt_b-usopinion_c-us%3FCMP%3Dshare_btn_fb); Daniel Nexon, “Toward a Neo-Progressive Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept. 4, 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united->

qualifications. Progressives are quick to emphasize political — not just military — commitments at the state and sub-state level, and take a very circumspect view of allying with illiberal actors.<sup>16</sup> The idea that “[w]e should act abroad only with those who share our commitments and then, only in ways consistent with those commitments”<sup>17</sup> implies solidarity with democratic countries that see their alliance with the United States as a source of security. But it is likewise a rejection of “[p]olitical and military support for tyrannical, predatory, and corrupt regimes.”<sup>18</sup>

Because one of the principal threats to U.S. security in the progressive view is the spread of authoritarianism and fascism,<sup>19</sup> the United States must keep faith with democratically-elected governments that rely on an alliance with the United States for their security. That includes NATO as an institution, Australia, Japan, and South Korea. But where allies turn autocratic or become incubators for fascism — such as Turkey or Hungary (both NATO members) — a commitment to the individual country will have to be tenuous, as a matter of principle. An illiberal state’s membership in an alliance institution will not prevent U.S. policy from promoting solidarity with anti-authoritarian forces within that country. NATO will not be a shield that implicitly permits the growth of illiberal, reactionary politics in Europe.

Alliances are also crucial to a progressive theory of security to the extent the United States seeks to divest itself of the military superiority imperative. As argued above, moving to a concept of military sufficiency without simply becoming isolationist (which itself would be anti-progressive) requires maintaining allies. It would be logically untenable to seek international solidarity with likeminded countries and peoples abroad while destroying alliance architectures around the world — one action would undermine the other. And

---

[states/2018-09-04/toward-neo-progressive-foreign-policy](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/shield-of-the-republic-a-democratic-foreign-policy-for-the-trump-age/570010/); Peter Beinart, “Shield of the Republic: America Needs an Entirely New Foreign Policy for the Trump Age,” *Atlantic*, Sept. 16, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/shield-of-the-republic-a-democratic-foreign-policy-for-the-trump-age/570010/>; Walzer, *A Foreign Policy for the Left*.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Nexon, “The Opposite of Neoconservatism Is Not Isolationism,” *Lawyers, Guns, & Money*, Sept. 25, 2018, <http://www.lawyersgunsmoneyblog.com/2018/09/opposite-neoconservatism-not-isolationism>.

<sup>17</sup> Walzer, *A Foreign Policy for the Left*, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Walzer, *A Foreign Policy for the Left*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Sanders, “[A New Authoritarian Axis Demands a Progressive Front.](#)”

where the abdication of an alliance is likely to lead to nuclear proliferation, conflict, or the spread of fascism, the alliance may have to stay in place as a short-term exception to the rule. But even then, the principle of supporting only democratic actors remains. In sum, then, the progressive theory of security requires fidelity only to *democratic* alliances, and any expansion of the U.S. alliance network is likely to emphasize *political* support first and military support last, if at all.

### *Reforming International Institutions*

U.S. foreign policy debates routinely center on the merits of sustaining the *mélange* of international institutions that constitute the “post-war” or “liberal international” order: the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization, among many others. These institutions play an essential role in *how* U.S. liberal internationalism conceives of keeping America secure.<sup>20</sup> Collectively, they preserve a stable international trading system that facilitates conflict-detering economic interdependence. The existence of international institutions also allows many (not all) nations around the world to escape the predations of international anarchy. The belief in reliable institutions lets many liberal-democratic states be liberal and democratic in their foreign policies — by focusing on trading relations and taking for granted the appearance of international stability. In the liberal internationalist theory of security, this partly explains why neither Europe nor Asia has experienced interstate wars in more than a generation — an architecture that combines U.S. military superiority and alliances with international institutions. It’s a package deal. The institutions part of that deal preserves a “capitalist peace”<sup>21</sup> through economic interdependence, and at the same time encourages many states to opt out of militaristic foreign policies.

The left embraces international institutions in principle because they promote multilateralism, the rule of law, and can help attenuate conflict — all of which favor justice and egalitarianism. But some international institutions must be repurposed or reformed to

---

<sup>20</sup> Jeremy Suri, “Globalism Made America Great,” *New Republic*, Sept. 27, 2018, <https://newrepublic.com/article/151404/globalism-helped-make-america-great>.

<sup>21</sup> Erik Gartzke, “The Capitalist Peace,” *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (January 2007): 166–91, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4122913>.



serve a more democratic, and less corrupting, imperative. This is not just about justice for its own sake, but rather that justice, in the form of equality, lessens the likelihood of war. Progressives believe that yawning gaps in economic inequality are a structural cause of conflict. As Bernie Sanders remarked in 2017, “Foreign policy must take into account the outrageous income and wealth inequality that exists globally and in our own country. This planet will not be secure or peaceful when so few have so much, and so many have so little...”<sup>22</sup>

A progressive security policy would therefore bet significantly on international institutions, but in qualified ways that differ from default liberal internationalism. It would seek to essentially save capitalism from itself by regulating it. At the international level, this might translate into a more democratic distribution of voting rights or agenda-setting powers in international financial bodies — especially the World Bank and International Monetary Fund — and a more relaxed attitude toward economic protectionism in instances where fairness or just labor practices are called into question. Although anathema to the traditional liberal bargain, these steps would serve as a means of attenuating giant wealth transfers across borders, as well as the political corruption that often accompanies those transfers, as dictators around the world have learned to “play” globalization processes to enrich themselves.<sup>23</sup> Such regulations of capitalism might also dramatically elevate the importance of the International Labor Organization, a moribund body that for decades has promoted not labor but rather pro-market deregulation trends.<sup>24</sup> But the larger point is best summarized by Sanders: “[W]e have got to help lead the struggle to defend and expand a rules-based international order in which law, not might, makes right.” The progressive theory of security wagers on the same institutional arrangements that make up liberal internationalism, but argues for their reform, in order to address the inequality gap,

---

<sup>22</sup> Alex Ward, “Read: Bernie Sanders’ Big Foreign Policy Speech,” *Vox*, Sept. 21, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/21/16345600/bernie-sanders-full-text-transcript-foreign-policy-speech-westminster>.

<sup>23</sup> Alex Cooley and John Heathershaw, *Dictators without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Guy Standing, “The ILO: An Agency for Globalization?” *Development and Change* 39, no. 3 (May 2008): 355-84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2008.00484.x>.

transnational corruption, and authoritarianism, thus prioritizing long-term, systemic causes of conflict, even if it might risk the “capitalist peace” in the near term.

### *Mutual Threat Reduction*

The final, and most distinct, element in the progressive theory of national security — one that’s absent from America’s default posture toward the world — is what might be called mutual threat reduction. If the progressive sensibility leads to the military being treated as a policy tool of last resort, progressives would have to prioritize the use of diplomacy to attenuate the threat landscape as a compensatory move. There is a defensible logic in this wager, because deterrence — managing threats by making threats — is not an end in itself but rather a means of buying time.<sup>25</sup> The ultimate success of deterrence derives from whether the time bought was used to ameliorate the conditions that gave rise to the need for deterrence in the first place. In the progressive view, diplomacy in the name of mutual threat reduction takes on concrete meaning: arms control, Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction programs, and international regimes that regulate technology development, transfers, and use. These kinds of initiatives are not new to U.S. foreign policy, but the progressive theory elevates their importance, and justifies taking a certain amount of risk in pursuing them with greater gusto.

Progressive principles commit the United States to doing the spade work necessary to discover whether real and potential adversaries are willing to restrain arms competitions or increase transparency into their military thinking, and to reciprocate when they do. Such a probe may require limited unilateral gestures from the United States. Advocates of *realpolitik* may see no reason to ever trust the intentions of an enemy or shrink U.S. advantages in military matters. But progressives should be willing to accept some amount of geopolitical risk — while stopping short of naiveté — in the name of, not only probing, but nudging the intentions of a threatening adversary toward the goal of mutual accommodation. In 2012, the Obama administration made a fleeting attempt at getting beyond mutually assured destruction with key competitors like Russia and China to reach a

---

<sup>25</sup> Van Jackson, “Stop Confusing Deterrence with Strategy,” *Diplomat*, July 6, 2015,

<https://thediplomat.com/2015/07/stop-confusing-deterrence-with-strategy/>.

place of “mutually assured stability.”<sup>26</sup> The premise of that forgotten project — that recognized that probing and stimulating opportunities for threat reduction is an essential part of avoiding unnecessary future wars — would be renewed in a progressive security vision. More importantly, it would become a preferred starting point for evaluating all strategic issues, from North Korea to arms races in emerging technologies.

## Playing the Long Game

There are significant continuities between the liberal internationalist theory of security and that of progressive internationalism. Nevertheless, the divergences are not trivial. The table below summarizes these distinctions.

<b>Comparing Progressive and Liberal Internationalist Theories of Security</b>	
<i>Default Liberal Internationalism</i>	<i>Progressive Internationalism</i>
Military Superiority	Military Sufficiency
Alliances	Democratic Alliances
International Institutions	Reformed International Institutions
Economic Interdependence	Mutual Threat Reduction

The progressive wager is not without risks. The process of changing American foreign policy in this way may jeopardize certain sources of stability that the progressive worldview takes for granted. But it also addresses long-term sources of recurring conflict that liberal internationalism ignores. Every theory of security amounts to a bet with distinct tradeoffs and risks. The progressive bet is that the American interest is best served by having a more peaceful world, and that’s only possible by pursuing greater justice and equity, and opposing tyranny wherever it arises.

<sup>26</sup> *Report on Mutual Assured Stability: Essential Components and Near Term Actions*, International Security Advisory Board, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2012), <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/196789.pdf>.

*Van Jackson is an associate editor at the Texas National Security Review, a senior lecturer in international relations at Victoria University of Wellington, and a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington. He is the author of [On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2018). The views expressed are solely those of the author.*

\*\*\*

## 2. Back to Basics: The Core Goals a “Progressive” Foreign Policy Must Address

*By Heather Hurlburt*

Both supporters and opponents of what gets marketed as “progressive foreign policy” base their definitions of it on a series of tactical litmus tests. Progressive foreign policy, one typically hears, must oppose militarism, interventionism, and alliances with dictators. However, by using this narrow definition, progressive thinkers fall prey to an error that has swept across American foreign policy thinking more broadly. Successful national strategies typically flow not from tactical choices — the *how* — but rather from fundamental goals — the *what for*. Progressive foreign policy should be aimed at achieving core progressive goals for society: improving economic justice and social cohesion, defending democratic institutions and norms, and fostering a patriotism in which diverse identities belong and flourish.

### Rethinking U.S. Interests

American foreign policy thinkers, overall, need to take a step back and consider what goals for society they seek to promote — and what dangers to society they seek to avert. Much of what has been published on the topic in recent months seems to assume that the interests

protected and promoted through U.S. foreign policy are set and unchanging, as is the way in which they interact — or don't — with what happens outside America's borders. Essay after essay has failed to engage with the profound challenges facing institutions, norms, economic equality, community security, and social cohesion, not just in the United States but in many other societies as well.<sup>27</sup>

Those assumptions are wrong. Two hundred and thirty-five years of America's history have seen repeated shifts in the national consensus around what foreign policy was protecting Americans from, and how it was achieved, as well as pitched battles among ideological, financial, and other interests when a prior consensus fell apart. Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton famously disputed which great European power posed the core threat to the new American experiment. Would the radicalism of the French Revolution (which Hamilton called the "caricature of human depravity") prove a "debauching influence" on the United States? Or would the status quo of Britain's political and economic dominance snuff out the unique character of American institutions, if not liberty itself?<sup>28</sup>

Elites of the 1920s and 1930s were slow to focus on fascism as an existential threat, assuming that existing institutions and allies could handle revanchist new powers, whose goals might very well be exaggerated.<sup>29</sup> That elite indifference to foreign threats was

---

<sup>27</sup> This essay is conceived as a response to a group of essays including, but not limited to: Peter Beinart, "Shield of the Republic," *Atlantic*, Sept. 16, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/shield-of-the-republic-a-democratic-foreign-policy-for-the-trump-age/570010/>; Daniel Bessner, "What Does Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Think About the South China Sea," *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/17/opinion/democratic-party-cortez-foreign-policy.html>; Van Jackson, "Is the Left Ready to Handle National Security Policy?" *POLITICO Magazine*, Sept. 11, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/09/11/left-national-security-foreign-policy-donald-trump-219744>; Dan Nexon, "Toward a Neo-Progressive Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Sept. 4, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-09-04/toward-neo-progressive-foreign-policy>.

<sup>28</sup> "Alexander Hamilton on the French Revolution," *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, accessed Oct. 15, 2018, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/593>.

<sup>29</sup> Among the prominent apologists for fascism was the president of the American Political Science Association. Seva Gunitzky, "These Are Three Reasons that Fascism Spread in 1930s America and Might Spread Again Today," *Monkey Cage Blog*, *Washington Post*, Aug. 12, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/12/these-are-the-three-reasons-that-fascism-spread-in-1930s-america-and-might-spread-again-today/?utm\\_term=.e0767e987559](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/12/these-are-the-three-reasons-that-fascism-spread-in-1930s-america-and-might-spread-again-today/?utm_term=.e0767e987559).

replaced, after World War II, by a bipartisan consensus that the threat posed by global communism required not just a security response, but political, economic, and cultural ones as well.

The decades that followed the Cold War have failed to produce a national consensus about the policies and messaging that connect security, economics, norms, and institutions. The Trump era has laid bare many weaknesses of U.S. foreign policy, and created some new ones. At the same time, elite American politics are scrambled, and definitions of foreign policy orthodoxies are up for grabs. Some progressives align with a bipartisan camp that sees great power competition as the paramount challenge.<sup>30</sup> Others give allegiance to a movement that conceives itself as anti-war or anti-militarist, and which sometimes crosses partisan lines to encompass notable conservative and libertarian thinkers, such as Andrew Bacevich. Curiously, neither camp engages deeply with the issues that are motivating younger progressive voters, as well as the civil society and activist groups that have seen the most growth and energy since 2016.<sup>31</sup> When those activists — and future office-holders from the left and center-left — engage with international issues, their focus is most likely to be climate change and a knot of interrelated issues surrounding poverty, insecurity, human rights, discrimination, and migration.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Thomas J. Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the Twenty-first Century and the Future of American Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> While voters across the political spectrum displayed similar levels of concern about trade, and more than half of Democratic and Republican voters expressed concern about immigration and terrorism as issues for the 2018 midterms, only immigration landed in the top 10 concerns for Democrats, while all three did for Republicans — reflecting the intensity of Democrats’ concern around the environment and treatment of racial and sexual minorities, much lower priorities for Republicans. “Voter Enthusiasm at Record High in Nationalized Midterm Environment,” Pew Research Center, Sept. 26, 2018, <http://www.people-press.org/2018/09/26/voter-enthusiasm-at-record-high-in-nationalized-midterm-environment/>.

<sup>32</sup> It is hard to overstate the divide between the progressive political space and the progressive security policy space. Essays specifically marketed as “progressive,” such as those by Beinart, Bessner, Jackson, and Nexon, mentioned above, miss the international dimensions of issues that progressives say are of most concern to them — jobs, justice and discrimination, and climate. For alternate perspectives that attract significant progressive attention and intellectual effort, but scant attention in grand strategy conversation, see, inter alia, the work of Bonnie Jenkins, at the panel, “Redefining National Security: Why and How,” Brookings, May 11, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/events/redefining-national-security-why-and-how/>. Or consider how a mass mobilization organization such as Indivisible combines traditional and non-traditional security concerns in its

Opposing those competing strands of progressive thought are President Donald Trump and his “sovereignist” allies. This group sees “globalism,” and a range of efforts aimed at “global governance, control, and domination,” as the main threats to “American sovereignty and our cherished independence.”<sup>33</sup> This sovereignist, or nativist, approach posits a straight line between socio-economic dislocations at home and malevolent actors overseas.

Progressives don’t have as clear a story of how developments they favor abroad impact communities at home. Nor have they built the intellectual or personnel connections between progressive approaches to domestic and foreign affairs. Those gaps undercut any ability to achieve policy ends. Writing about “weaponized interdependence,” Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman point out that, under conditions of contemporary globalization, “economic institutions, which were created to promote efficient market interactions, have become powerful sites of political control.”<sup>34</sup> This dynamic poses a threat to core domestic institutions and progressive priorities and inserts international affairs into what was once the domain of domestic policy experts alone. U.S. national security strategists ought to recognize as much, regardless of their ideological position.

Progressives in particular ought to focus on three areas where those connections are vital: The prosperity and sustainability of American communities depend on choices the United States makes in the global economy, as well as at home; U.S. democratic institutions and norms are subject to a withering stress test driven, in part, by a rival autocratic model with global reach; and the project of constructing a cohesive American identity that thrives on diversity is under profound pressure from that rival autocratic model, aligned with profoundly regressive forces inside the U.S. A national security strategy that fails to

---

advocacy: <https://www.indivisible.org/resource/donald-trump-national-security-risk-here’s-current-trumphreatlevel>.

<sup>33</sup> Alex Ward, “Read Trump’s Speech to the UN General Assembly,” Sept. 24, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/9/25/17901082/trump-un-2018-speech-full-text>.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, “Weaponized Interdependence,” DRAFT prepared for *International Studies Association Conference*, April 4, 2018: 46, <http://henryfarrell.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Weaponized-Interdependence-April-2018.pdf>.

evaluate policies on how they further these goals is not “progressive” — nor is it a particularly good strategy.

## **Economic and Social Cohesion**

In the past, it was obvious to U.S. foreign policy thinkers when foreign powers posed a threat to American prosperity and way of life. Take, for example, Britain’s imperial system, with its chokehold on certain products and trade routes following American independence, or Soviet communism from the 1950s to the 1980s. But the belief in the unipolar moment in the 1990s — that no alternatives to American-style capitalism remained to challenge the United States following the end of the Cold War — got the foreign policy establishment out of the habit of connecting the construction of global economic arrangements to the realities of how Americans lived their lives at home. At the same time, economic globalization shifted control of Americans’ daily economic lives from the realm of domestic affairs to international affairs, as corporations consolidated away from regional headquarters, supply chains globalized, and the influence of financial markets dwarfed that of managers.

As long as the U.S. economy continues to perform well, it is tempting for foreign policy strategists to decide that the United States can keep its nose out of international economic affairs. But that view is ahistorical — successful foreign policies have always incorporated economic fundamentals, while foreign policy failures have often occurred because planners neglected to account for the resources needed to support their plans. Moreover, if the aim is to develop an expressly progressive foreign and security strategy, then there is no excuse for many recent strategic proposals that ignore the economic and social considerations that are fundamental concerns of progressivism.<sup>35</sup>

A progressive American foreign policy should have three economic pillars: ensuring the basic health and sustainability of the U.S. economy, addressing inequality, and attacking

---

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Beinart, “Shield of the Republic”; Bessner, “What Does Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Think About the South China Sea”; Jackson, “Is the Left Ready to Handle National Security?”; and Wright, “The Return to Great-Power Rivalry Was Inevitable.”



absolute poverty both at home and abroad. (Progressives can debate the relative importance of the three.)

Grand strategists, then, need to have a clear understanding of the foundations of the U.S. economy that they are promoting. They must also be judged on whether their view of grand strategy has expanded to include climate, energy, and other challenges too — as my colleague Sharon Burke has argued.<sup>36</sup>

Increasingly, too, as Van Jackson’s leading essay in this roundtable rightly emphasizes, progressive security strategists need to care about inequality. Strong social science evidence warns that inequality — and public perceptions of inequality — undermine faith in democratic institutions.<sup>37</sup> Over the last three decades, inequality has surged in the United States, in other industrialized economies, and in many emerging economies.<sup>38</sup> Economists cite multiple factors as possible contributors to this stubborn trend, including shifts in how capital moves and is accumulated, trade-driven downward pressure on wages, replacement of skilled and semi-skilled workers by automation, and the failure of national governments to implement redistributive and retraining policies to match the scale of changes in patterns of capital and trade movement.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> See Burke’s Phase Zero project, <https://www.newamerica.org/resource-security/phase-zero-project/about/>; and recent articles including: Sharon Burke, “A Climate for Conflict: Stories from Somalia,” *New America*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.newamerica.org/resource-security/phase-zero-blog/climate-conflict-stories-somalia/>. Her program also published the report, Ken Sofer, “The Slow Motion Crisis: The Destabilizing Effects of Climate Change in Turkey and Iraq Through 2050,” *New America*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.newamerica.org/resource-security/policy-papers/relationship-between-climate-change-and-security/>.

<sup>37</sup> Terry Lynn Karl, “Economic Inequality and Democratic Instability,” *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 1, (January 2000): 149–56, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/17011/summary>; Kathy Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> For the trends, see: *The World Inequality Report 2018*, World Inequality Lab, (2018), <https://wir2018.wid.world/>. A wide-ranging analysis is offered by Kemal Derviş and Zia Qureshi, “Brief: Income Distribution Within Countries: Rising Inequality,” Global Economy and Development at Brookings, (August 2016), [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/income-inequality-within-countries\\_august-2016.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/income-inequality-within-countries_august-2016.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> For the interconnections among automation and trade effects, see, inter alia, David Autor, David Dorn, and Gordon Hanson, “The China Shock: Learning From Labor Market Adjustment to Large Changes in Trade,”

This dynamic of rising inequality affects the cohesion of the European Union and NATO, as well as the rise of populist authoritarianism, spanning from Brazil to Sweden to the Philippines. And it interacts with preexisting racial and gender prejudices to heighten volatility around policy areas that have a transnational component, from migration and refugees to international organizations to trade.

America's international economic policy choices have contributed to the rise of inequality through several of those factors, not just trade. This means, however, that the United States also has multiple levers to shift them in the future — if it is willing to use them, and if it is able to leave behind the current administration's unilateral blustering in favor of strategic coordination with other countries that face the same societal pressures. Future administrations will face a weakened global economic architecture, giving them the freedom to integrate creative strategies into overall thinking, from the future of U.S.-E.U. trade to rejoining a World Trade Organization (WTO) reform process. The creative thinking is out there: Jennifer Harris has written thoughtfully on a renegotiated bargain with U.S. global business.<sup>40</sup> Climate thinkers have made a range of proposals for how existing international economic structures can speed progress toward a low-carbon economy.<sup>41</sup> Washington has now isolated itself from talks over WTO reforms, which seems to have had the regrettable effect that progressive policy thinkers are not engaging with the possibilities there as much as they might.

---

*Annual Review of Economics*, no. 8, (2016): 205–240, <https://www.ddorn.net/papers/Autor-Dorn-Hanson-ChinaShock.pdf>. For the finance side, see Gillian Tett, “Fixing Finance,” *Foreign Affairs*, (July/August 2012), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/fixing-finance?cid=soc-tw>.

<sup>40</sup> Jennifer Harris, “Making Trade Address Inequality,” *Democracy Journal*, no. 48 (Spring 2018), <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/48/making-trade-address-inequality/>.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Adrian Henry Macey, “How Trade Policies Can Support Global Efforts to Curb Climate Change,” *The Conversation*, July 27, 2017, <http://theconversation.com/how-trade-policies-can-support-global-efforts-to-curb-climate-change-81029>.

## Institutions and Norms

Post-Cold War foreign policy has seen American institutions and norms as givens, neither challenged from abroad nor even affected by strategic choices. But in the history of the American experiment, that attitude is an anomaly. Thomas Jefferson saw an alliance with French republicanism as the preferable path to defend, and perhaps even spread, the American form of government; Alexander Hamilton saw the stability and spread of British structures as a better bet; George Washington preferred studied neutrality between London and Paris. (Jefferson thus inaugurated the grand American tradition of excessive optimism about regime change.) As has been typical ever since, actual U.S. foreign policy wound up being a little of each.

Certainly, the early Cold Warriors saw the Soviet threat to U.S. institutions and norms, as well as those of U.S. allies, as a profound one. Anti-communism was the major driver for much of American foreign policy. It was used to justify initiatives from the moon shot to the Civil Rights Act. But it also led to McCarthyism. Joseph McCarthy's legacy may make it uncomfortable for progressives to assert that American democracy is under threat from without as well as within. Yet more progressives agree on the profound contemporary threat to U.S. democracy than one might expect. Consider two recent statements:

The return to rivalry was inevitable, if tragically so. It is rooted in a clash of social models — a free world and a neo-authoritarian world — that directly affects how people live. China and Russia are very different powers with different strategies, but they share the objective of targeting free and open societies to make the world a safer place for authoritarianism.<sup>42</sup>

... [W]hat we are seeing now in the world is the rise of a new authoritarian axis. While the leaders who make up this axis may differ in some respects, they share key attributes: intolerance toward ethnic and religious minorities, hostility toward

---

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Wright, "The Return to Great-Power Rivalry Was Inevitable," *Atlantic*, Sept. 12, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/liberal-international-order-free-world-trump-authoritarianism/569881/>.

democratic norms, antagonism toward a free press, constant paranoia about foreign plots, and a belief that the leaders of government should be able use their positions of power to serve their own selfish financial interests.<sup>43</sup>

The first is from the center-left Brookings scholar (and contributor to this symposium) Thomas Wright; the second, from Sen. Bernie Sanders.

But if a broad range of foreign policy thinkers — and 63 percent of Americans who identify as Democrat or Democratic-leaning<sup>44</sup> — agree on the threat that contemporary authoritarian states pose to U.S. institutions and the American way of life, they have not coalesced around a plan for what to do about it. Sanders calls for a variety of measures to fight economic and political corruption at home, including “reconceptualiz[ing] the global order,” participating in “an international movement that mobilizes behind a vision of shared prosperity, security and dignity for all people,” and standing for “unity and inclusion” in the face of “division and hatred.”<sup>45</sup> But Sanders’ October 2018 speech offered no specific policies aimed at shoring up NATO, building coalitions of pro-democracy forces, or combatting the challenges of cybersecurity, election meddling, and propaganda meant to heighten societal divisions.

Wright, by contrast, calls for a “free world” strategy that seeks to deter Russia and other authoritarian meddlers by “focusing as much on measures short of general war — such as economic weapons and political interference — as on large-scale military buildups.”<sup>46</sup> But he skips over the possibility of strengthening and reforming American institutions so that

---

<sup>43</sup> Bernie Sanders, “Building a Global Democratic Movement to Counter Authoritarianism,” Speech at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Oct. 9, 2018,

<https://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sanders-speech-at-sais-building-a-global-democratic-movement-to-counter-authoritarianism>.

<sup>44</sup> Pew, “Key Opinion Findings on Trump, Putin and the Countries They Lead,” Pew Research Center, July 13, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/13/key-public-opinion-findings-on-trump-putin-and-the-countries-they-lead/>.

<sup>45</sup> Sanders, “Building a Global Democratic Movement to Counter Authoritarianism.”

<sup>46</sup> Wright, “The Return to Great-Power Rivalry Was Inevitable.”

they can better resist outside pressures, writing, “[T]he American system is too open to protect fully.”<sup>47</sup>

The reality is that the United States will have to do a little of both: shoring up its institutions — and Americans’ trust in them — as well as developing more effective methods to push back against authoritarian regimes, including deploying the tools of an open society against authoritarian regimes. The peculiarities of the Trump administration’s Russia policy have delayed a number of commonsense bipartisan measures related to election security and broader cyber concerns, while think tanks that include leading Democrats have developed proposals for comprehensive public-private response strategies.<sup>48</sup> It is surprising to see how many so-called progressive national security strategies pass over the challenges to America’s democracy,

## Identity and Belonging

Finally, as many commentators on the future of democracy have noted, one of the key battles at the moment is over identity and belonging.<sup>49</sup> The United States and other democratic societies are becoming internally divided in ways that spill into foreign affairs, repudiating notions of the state as a unified, monolithic entity. Cities are conducting foreign policy and are taking the lead in responding to progressive priorities like climate change.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Wright, “The Return to Great-Power Rivalry Was Inevitable.”

<sup>48</sup> “The ASD Policy Blueprint for Countering Authoritarian Interference in Democracies” from the German Marshall Fund, is perhaps the most comprehensive but not the only such policy document, co-authored by a key Hillary Clinton adviser, Laura Rosenberger, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/asd-policy-blueprint-countering-authoritarian-interference-democracies>.

<sup>49</sup> Observers tend to use “identity politics” to refer to the organizing efforts of different subgroups. Many use the term to refer primarily or exclusively to organizing among underprivileged groups. Francis Fukuyama offers a global critique in “Against Identity Politics,” *Foreign Affairs*, Aug. 14, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2018-08-14/against-identity-politics-tribalism-francis-fukuyama>. On white identity politics, see Ashley Jardina, “White Identity Politics Isn’t Just About White Supremacy,” *Monkey Cage Blog, Washington Post*, Aug. 16, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/16/white-identity-politics-isnt-just-about-white-supremacy-its-much-bigger/?utm\\_term=.64cd2f5a524e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/16/white-identity-politics-isnt-just-about-white-supremacy-its-much-bigger/?utm_term=.64cd2f5a524e).

<sup>50</sup> Domestically, the last two years have seen the creation of the “We Are Still In” climate coalition (<https://www.wearestillin.com/>) and increased focus on international affairs from the U.S. Conference of

But right-wing populists, authoritarians, and even white nationalists have built effective international cooperation — with profound consequences.

In response, Wright wants to invigorate democratic alliances, ratcheting up pressure on non-democratic allies as need be. Sanders wants to build global popular movements. But for either approach to succeed, the U.S. national security community itself is going to have to wrestle with issues of identity and belonging. Too many specialists avoid engaging on issues that connect international affairs with nasty domestic politics — from the prejudice and restrictions against Muslims with U.S. citizenship and those counted as key allies in the fight against terrorism, to U.S. foreign policy toward Central America and the crisis of family separation at U.S. borders, to the racialized resentments that simmer just beneath the surface of trade policy. But national security and foreign policy, as fields, can't flourish apart from domestic policy. And the Trump administration's rhetoric has shown that, where internationalists are reluctant to wade in and draw connections to Americans' daily life, nativists will take their place.

Finally, for avowedly progressive thinkers to fail to engage identity and diversity is unacceptable. The field of writers recognized as qualified to opine on national security strategy lacks the diversity of background, gender, age, and experience of the progressive electorate, or even of progressive officeholders. The strategies they have put forward fail uniformly to engage with the prejudice, discrimination, and violence that are core security concerns for large numbers of progressives — and likely driving motivators for the next generation of progressive leaders. Finding a synthesis between the best of what the tradition of grand strategy has to offer and the reality of the goals and members of contemporary American progressivism is the essential task for any progressive national security strategy.

*Heather Hurlburt runs the New Models of Policy Change Initiative at New America. Her career at the intersection of politics and foreign policy includes stints in the White House,*

---

Mayors. Internationally, forums have emerged, such as the European Union's International Urban Cooperation, the World Bank's Global Platform for Sustainable Cities, and the Global Covenant of Mayors. Sub-national entities are playing an expanded role in the Paris Climate Agreement and the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.

*State Department, and Capitol Hill, as well as extensive experience in advocacy organizations.*

\*\*\*

### 3. Principles for a Progressive Defense Policy

*By Adam Mount*

Like other foreign policy doctrines, progressive internationalism is grounded in a set of moral principles. Progressive internationalists believe that the United States must represent a force for good in the world — not just good as Americans see it, but a kind of good that any reasonable society could accept for itself. Progressives grasp intuitively that global perceptions of U.S. actions are important to both their success and their moral acceptability. In practice, these principles oblige American foreign policy not only to support the capabilities of American citizens to lead lives that are healthy, fulfilling, and free, but to also do the same for foreign citizens.

The best recent progressive foreign policy proposals are directly motivated by these principles: a global democratic movement to confront the ascendant nexus of transnational neofascism, authoritarianism, kleptocracy, and corruption;<sup>51</sup> a major investment in international development,

---

<sup>51</sup> Bernie Sanders, “Building A Global Democratic Movement to Counter Authoritarianism,” Oct. 9, 2018, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sanders-speech-at-sais-building-a-global-democratic-movement-to-counter-authoritarianism>; Thomas Wright, “The Liberal International Order Must Be Replaced,” *Atlantic*, Sept. 12, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/liberal-international-order-free-world-trump-authoritarianism/569881/>; Dan Nexon, “Toward a Neo-Progressive Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept. 4, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-09-04/toward-neo-progressive-foreign-policy>; Kelly Magsamen, Max Bergmann, Michael Fuchs, and Trevor Sutton, “Securing a Democratic World,” Center for American Progress, Sept. 5, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/09/05/457451/securing-democratic-world/>.

global health, and diplomatic efforts;<sup>52</sup> trade policies intended to reduce global inequality;<sup>53</sup> and global environmental sustainability. It is not only a moral imperative but also the most effective means of securing America's interests: Just as democracy, health, controlling inequality, and sustainability are important to a healthy polity, they are similarly important to creating a stable and peaceful world in which that polity can exist.

The same principles can also underwrite a progressive defense strategy, though applying them to defense is less common.

National defense needs the moral guidance and skepticism that progressive internationalism can offer. Progressives begin from the recognition that the threats America faces are generally neither existential in nature nor susceptible to resolution by military force.<sup>54</sup> In Washington, threat inflation is commonplace and there is an overwhelming tendency to defer to the advice or recommendations of military officials, even where there is little evidence that military force can resolve a given problem. Though the Department of Defense has abandoned its plan to concurrently fight two wars in two different theaters, other unrealistic maximalist standards have taken its place. Strategists commonly seek to expunge threats rather than to prevent their emergence or manage their consequences. The unrealistic requirement to operate freely any time, anywhere has replaced defense of the homeland and allied territory with defense of the forward deployed joint force. Waste is rampant and persistently immune to oversight. War is apparently endless. Force planning is disconnected from threat assessment. Preventive and diplomatic policies have given way to an overwhelming tendency to see military force as the primary means of addressing strategic challenges. In short, Washington has fallen to militarism.<sup>55</sup>

The standard slogans of the left remain valuable: Progressives support diplomatic and preventive solutions over military mitigation, multilateralism over unilateralism, cooperative threat reduction, and arms control over arms racing. However, slogans are not enough.

---

<sup>52</sup> Chris Murphy, "Rethinking the Battlefield," Christ Murphy United States Senator for Connecticut, accessed Nov. 8, 2018, <https://www.murphy.senate.gov/rethinking-the-battlefield>.

<sup>53</sup> Jennifer Harris, "Making Trade Address Inequality," *Democracy*, March 12, 2018, <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/48/making-trade-address-inequality/>.

<sup>54</sup> Micah Zenko and Michael A. Cohen, "Clear and Present Safety," *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 21, 2012, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-america/2012-02-21/clear-and-present-safety>.

<sup>55</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*, 2nd updated edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).



As they seek power in Congress and the White House, progressive internationalists must present a vision not just for national security but for the structure and function of the military in a world where U.S. hegemony is in relative decline. This vision must recognize not only the dangerous tendency of uncontrolled American militarism to crowd out domestic obligations, provoke arms races and instability, and erode American moral authority around the world; it must also plan and posture to meet America's moral obligation to defend free peoples from war and to intervene in humanitarian disasters, including through the use of force when necessary and effective.

## **A Military Without Militarism**

Progressives remain intensely concerned about the corrosive effects the national security state has had on the country's ability to sustain a healthy domestic polity. In recent years, reflexive militarism has impeded the fiscal and democratic foundations needed to sustain a just society.

Defense spending now approaches \$700 billion, accounting for about 55 percent of all discretionary spending. Financing that spending with debt has exacerbated economic inequality by borrowing from the wealthy,<sup>56</sup> been used to justify an endless string of tax and domestic spending cuts, and deferred the costs to future generations. The sheer magnitude of the sum crowds out domestic efforts on education, federal health care and poverty alleviation, scientific research, environmental protection, non-defense foreign policy, and a wide range of other essential functions. In recent decades, Congress has deliberately cut these accounts to the bone — and then started to slice away bone. As a result, the United States is no longer able to meet its essential obligations to provide for the health and welfare of its citizens.

Even these levels of spending are apparently not enough. Defense officials warn that the country's "competitive military advantage has been eroding" and that America faces "a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory."<sup>57</sup> The interminable wars in the Middle East are no closer to victory. Defense officials commonly warn that the United States is losing its technological edge. "The last decade," Chairman Dunford said last year, has

---

<sup>56</sup> Rosella Capella Zielinski, "How U.S. Wars Abroad Increase Inequality At Home," *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 5, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-10-05/us-wars-abroad-increase-inequality-home>.

<sup>57</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, Department of Defense (January 2018):14, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

“threatened our ability to project power and we have lost our advantage in key warfighting areas.”<sup>58</sup> The Air Force says its needs to add more than 70 new squadrons, from 312 to 386; the Navy is requesting funding to grow from 286 to 355 ships; and the Army is seeking 80,000 new recruits for an increase of 11,500 more soldiers than in 2017.<sup>59</sup> The Department of Defense is purchasing new fleets of aircraft carriers, submarines, fighter aircraft, tankers, and trying to replace nearly the entire nuclear arsenal.

No appropriation will ever be enough. The military has an obligation to attempt to maximize security to the greatest extent possible within the limits set by civilian leadership. However, successive administrations have avoided making hard choices about military strategy, and Congress has an abiding tendency to defer to the Defense Department on questions of force structure. As a result, the United States lacks a rational process to size its military. At the same time, the escalating cost of military hardware and appalling waste means that U.S. forces are spread increasingly thinly across the globe, exacerbating the perception that the United States is losing its competitive edge.

A dysfunctional congressional process that reflexively privileges defense over other discretionary spending needs is only one of the alarming effects that militarism has had on American democracy. A progressive administration should endeavor to reverse the deleterious consequences of the militarization of American foreign policy, democracy, and civic life. Improving transparency of military missions and capabilities,<sup>60</sup> ending unitary nuclear launch authority,<sup>61</sup> restricting the transfer of military technology to civilian law enforcement, resisting the trend of appointing current

---

<sup>58</sup> Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., “Posture Statement,” House Appropriations Committee Defense, June 15, 2017, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AP/AP02/20170615/106086/HHRG-115-AP02-Wstate-DunfordJ-20170615.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> “Status of the Navy,” United States Navy, [https://www.navy.mil/navydata/nav\\_legacy.asp?id=146](https://www.navy.mil/navydata/nav_legacy.asp?id=146); Gina Harkins, “355-Ship Navy Will Mean Extending Vessels Past Planned Lifespans: Admiral,” *Military.com*, Sept. 5, 2018, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2018/09/05/355-ship-navy-will-mean-extending-vessels-past-planned-lifespans-admiral.html>; Oriana Pawlyk, “Air Force Wants to Surge Growth by More Than 70 New Squadrons,” *Military.com*, Sept. 17, 2018, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2018/09/17/air-force-wants-surge-growth-more-70-new-squadrons.html>; Nafeesa Syeed and Chloe Whiteaker, “Army Buildup Confronts Headwinds of Tight Labor Market,” *Stars and Stripes*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.stripes.com/news/army/army-buildup-confronts-headwinds-of-tight-labor-market-1.516499>.

<sup>60</sup> Loren DeJonge Schulman and Alice Friend, “The Pentagon’s Transparency Problem,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-05-02/pentagons-transparency-problem>.

<sup>61</sup> Bruce Blair, “Presidents Have Too Much Power over U.S. Nukes. Especially President Trump,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 18, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/presidents-have-too-much-power-over-us-nukes-especially-president-trump/2017/08/18/abd0041e-8363-11e7-ab27-1a21a8e006ab\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/presidents-have-too-much-power-over-us-nukes-especially-president-trump/2017/08/18/abd0041e-8363-11e7-ab27-1a21a8e006ab_story.html).

and former officers to cabinet positions, sharply limiting electronic surveillance of U.S. and allied citizens, ending the treatment of immigrants as a military threat to be addressed with military methods, and reclaiming Congress' responsibility to declare and authorize war are all steps that would help to restore democratic oversight of military policy. Rescinding the blank check 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force is a necessary first step.<sup>62</sup>

A progressive internationalist administration should not only slow the growth of, combat waste in, and more carefully evaluate defense spending, it must also reduce defense spending — both as a proportion of the federal budget and in absolute terms. Consistent with their efforts to transform national healthcare, progressives should have no reluctance to ensuring that every American veteran can access mental and physical care, job services, housing, and a competent Veterans Administration.<sup>63</sup> Supporting American veterans is not only a solemn obligation but should be understood as an eliminable cost of war.

## A Moral Military

The United States is fond of saying that its alliances are predicated on shared values and interests, but this was only ever selectively true. Turkey, Hungary, Poland, and Saudi Arabia are all in various stages of descent into authoritarianism, autocracy, or fascism. Unconditional support for these states corrodes America's moral standing and devalues the word "ally." A global effort to support democracies will require a revision of certain alliance commitments to ensure they do not contradict this or other American objectives. Serving as a force for good in the world means allying with those countries that similarly serve as a force for good, and resisting those that do not.

A progressive administration should also examine not only the democratic values of alliance partners but also the strategic and humanitarian consequences of arms sales agreements that often accompany alliance commitments. Decades of wars in which U.S. soldiers and civilians were killed with American-made weapons led the Obama administration to issue new guidance to "take into account" the human rights and broader records of recipients when evaluating arms transfers. Yet the outrage of American-made munitions killing Yemeni civilians and causing an appalling famine

---

<sup>62</sup> Brian McKeon and Caroline Tess, "How Congress Can Take Back Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 7, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-11-07/how-congress-can-take-back-foreign-policy>.

<sup>63</sup> Phillip Carter, "What America Owes Its Veterans," *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2017), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-08-15/what-america-owes-its-veterans>.

demonstrates that these restrictions were not enough.<sup>64</sup> To decisively end U.S. complicity in such atrocities and persistent conflict, a progressive administration should establish binding — not just rhetorical or aspirational — restrictions on transfers to countries engaged in human rights abuses or other actions that run contrary to U.S. objectives. Serving as a force for good in the world means, at a minimum, ensuring that U.S. weapons are not used to perpetrate atrocities or assist repression.

To serve as a moral military, U.S. procurement and operations must be subject to additional scrutiny. Continued technological superiority affords the United States a unique opportunity to set an example with respect to morally problematic weapons systems. The United States need not offer authoritarian or irresponsible regimes an excuse to brandish cluster munitions, landmines, remote piloted aircraft, or chemical and nuclear weapons, which should be subject to strict civilian oversight to ensure they are consistent with international standards of just conduct in war. Similarly, U.S. counterterrorism operations should also be subject to tighter standards to minimize civilian casualties to the absolute lowest level possible. Despite some significant efforts during the Obama administration and within the military, unintended casualties remain far too high.<sup>65</sup> The United States should be willing to accept additional vulnerability in order to further reduce civilian casualties. Any incidents that do take place should be disclosed and those responsible held to account.

Declining relative power and defense budgets will oblige a progressive administration to prioritize U.S. military objectives and to revise or rescind those that can no longer be realistically met. The U.S. Armed Forces can best defend the rights of foreign citizens through humanitarian operations and deterrence of high-end threats to the high-end threats to free peoples. The military should be structured and resourced to accomplish both rapid mass atrocity response and deterrence operations and should be tasked and employed only when it can effectively accomplish defined

---

<sup>64</sup> Chris Murphy, “We Must Demand Accountability for Saudi Arabia’s Behavior,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 15, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/we-must-demand-accountability-for-saudi-arabias-behavior/2018/10/15/b4b5ecc8-doac-11e8-b2d2-f397227b43fo\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/we-must-demand-accountability-for-saudi-arabias-behavior/2018/10/15/b4b5ecc8-doac-11e8-b2d2-f397227b43fo_story.html). Former senior Obama administration officials have been instrumental in highlighting the failures of the previous policy and pushing for an end to support for the war. “Former Senior Obama Administration Officials Call For Halt to All U.S. Support for the War in Yemen,” National Security Action, Nov. 11, 2018, <https://nationalsecurityaction.org/newsroom-blog/yemen-open-statement>.

<sup>65</sup> Margaret Sullivan, “Middle East Civilian Deaths Have Soared Under Trump. And the Media Mostly Shrug,” *Washington Post*, March 18, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/middle-east-civilian-deaths-have-soared-under-trump-and-the-media-mostly-shrug/2018/03/16/fc344968-2932-11e8-874b-d517e912f125\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/middle-east-civilian-deaths-have-soared-under-trump-and-the-media-mostly-shrug/2018/03/16/fc344968-2932-11e8-874b-d517e912f125_story.html).

objectives with the participation of the local population and using means consistent with the interests of those peoples as they themselves understand them.

These missions entail a moral obligation to maintain a capable and ready foreign presence in South Korea, Japan, Eastern Europe, the Baltic states, and elsewhere to deter war and, if necessary, to act to defend these allies from aggression. Yet too often U.S. deployments do not reflect these core moral obligations and strategic interests. In an increasingly competitive world, in which America's relative power is in decline, U.S. strategists cannot afford to expend credibility or raise tensions for actions that are purely symbolic or expressive. There are serious and persistent questions about America's ability to have a positive effect in the Middle East and whether the benefits of counter-terror operations have outweighed their tendency to exacerbate the problem. Too many exercises are postured in ways that raise tensions or the risk of misperception. China's encroachment into South China Sea and its coercion of its neighbors should be resisted, but where U.S. efforts stand little chance of success, or neighbors are reluctant to participate, they are ultimately futile.

## **A Force for Stability**

Progressive internationalists are acutely aware that U.S. force structure and posture has too often indirectly undermined the security of the continental United States and its allies by posing an unnecessary threat to potential adversaries and fueling arms races. The principles that underwrite progressivism also require a commitment to military stability. A progressive administration should act to ensure that the U.S. Armed Forces serve as a force for stability in the world, rather than instability.

When the United States forward deploys or stations hi-technology conventional military assets, it generates rational concerns in the capitals of potential adversaries about America's intentions and its capabilities. Russia, China, and North Korea have difficulty detecting and discriminating between America's conventional strike and intelligence forces, on the one hand, and logistical and civilian operations on the other. Furthermore, U.S. theater and global missile defense systems do possess a capability to limit retaliatory damage after a counterstrike attempt, even if U.S. leadership would never contemplate such a strike. U.S. capabilities often exceed what is necessary to defend U.S. allies and have contributed to Russian, Chinese, and North Korean efforts to enhance the number, survivability, and sophistication of their forces.

To limit these risks, progressives should support a comprehensive research and policy program to identify ways to limit the stability risks of U.S. forward presence. If strategic stability is to have any

meaning, the United States must seek to limit not only the threats adversaries pose to it, but also the threat that it poses to potential adversaries. At the same time, progressive internationalists must not fall prey to the fallacy that unilateral disarmament will necessarily lead adversaries to follow suit.

Too many Americans believe the military exists to eliminate rather than manage sources of vulnerability, a view that has a tendency to cause the problems it aspires to solve. In fact, mutual vulnerability with Russia and China, and soon also with North Korea, is a strategic reality that cannot be solved with a new weapons system.

The debate over the “third offset” illustrates these tendencies.<sup>66</sup> Conceived as a cost effective means of maintaining U.S. superiority over rising competitors by capitalizing on new technologies that “offset” adversary anti-access and area-denial capabilities, the effort was incapacitated by two fatal strategic flaws. First, the two previous offsets were conceived as means to fortify defensive capabilities against a numerically superior and potentially aggressive adversary. The “third offset” was intended to enable the United States to overcome static and defensive capabilities and project power into contested areas. Second, these defensive capabilities — cheap area-denial ballistic missiles, submarine, anti-space, and cyber capabilities — are, in fact, the “third offset” because they exploit cost-efficient technological advances to offset a qualitatively superior force. In short, “third offset” thinking places the United States in the highly undesirable position of attempting to overcome and overwhelm a highly effective offset strategy. You can’t offset an offset.

As relative decline makes U.S. military superiority fiscally and operationally impractical, the United States will need a new standard for shaping its military requirements and conducting deterrence. Rather than minimize risk and maximize capability, military spending and future acquisition planning must be rigorously tied and tailored to threat assessments. As Van Jackson’s essay in this roundtable suggests, military sufficiency is a more achievable and, in many cases, more effective standard than military superiority.

---

<sup>66</sup> Robert Work, “National Defense University Convocation,” Aug. 5, 2014, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/605598/national-defense-university-convocation/>; Robert Work, “The Third U.S. Offset Strategy and Its Implications for Partners and Allies,” Jan. 28, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/606641/the-third-us-offset-strategy-and-its-implications-for-partners-and-allies>.

A defensive force posture is the most effective and sustainable means of defending both the United States and democratic societies around the world. As the United States loses the ability to operate unchallenged on the Chinese littorals and in the Russian periphery, it should, together with its allies, invest in systems capable of defending allied territory against aggression: cost-effective coastal defense missiles, denial of intrusions by special-operation forces, flexible and agile concentrations of high-end forces that can deploy rapidly to prepositioned equipment in theater, and other area-denial capabilities. Though the Armed Forces will have to retain expeditionary capabilities to prevail over attempts to isolate and deny access to allies or humanitarian catastrophes, the United States should put its money where money is currently most effective: These requirements are not nearly so high as those for maintaining military superiority.<sup>67</sup> Too much deterrence planning has emphasized escalation control and retaliation and forgotten that the most important determinant of deterrence success is the ability to defend and deny with conventional forces.

In particular, progressives are intensely concerned about the risks, costs, and ethical implications of U.S. nuclear weapons policy. A commitment to pursue nuclear disarmament, and making sustained progress toward reducing the number and role of nuclear weapons, is imperative to retaining moral authority, to serving as an exemplar for allies and smaller powers contemplating their own nuclear programs, and to leading the way in the construction of a safer world. Progressive internationalists should push to structure and posture the U.S. nuclear arsenal for deterrence operations and abandon requirements for escalation control and nuclear warfighting.<sup>68</sup> The U.S. military must, in this view, eliminate peripheral systems in the arsenal that go beyond what's needed for existential deterrence — specifically, the “supplementary” sea-launched cruise missile and a lower yield warhead for the Trident sea-launched ballistic missile proposed in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, but also perhaps the air-launched cruise missile. The case for nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles is also increasingly tenuous.<sup>69</sup> Progressive internationalists should vigorously pursue

---

<sup>67</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, “How to Deter China,” *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 16, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-02-16/how-deter-china>.

<sup>68</sup> Bruce G Blair, with Jessica Sleight and Emma Claire Foley, *The End of Nuclear Warfighting: Moving to a Deterrence-Only Posture* (Princeton, NJ: Program on Science and Global Security, Princeton University, September 2018), <https://www.globalzero.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/anpr-180915-1736-1.pdf>; Adam Mount, “The Case Against New Nuclear Weapons,” Center for American Progress, May 4, 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/05/04/431833/case-new-nuclear-weapons/>.

<sup>69</sup> Jon Wolfsthal, “The Political and Military Vulnerability of America’s Land-Based Nuclear Missiles,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 73, no. 3 (May 4, 2017): 150–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2017.1314996>.

creative new concepts for arms control to address the risks of a range of new nuclear and nonnuclear technologies with Russia, China, and North Korea.

## Conclusion

Each of the steps outlined above are likely to be controversial because they entail accepting an additional margin of vulnerability. In fact, the United States is vulnerable to adversary strategic forces, terrorism, climate change, instability due to migration, and the actions of other potential adversaries. The quest for perfect security is the product of anxiety and is bound to fail. A greater strength is required to admit America's vulnerability than to deny it, to manage vulnerability than to act as though it can be eliminated. This task now falls to progressive internationalists.

In short, a progressive internationalist administration would ensure that the United States military serves as a force for good in the world by protecting the security, welfare, and democratic rights of not only U.S. and allied citizens, but also other foreigners. The objective may seem familiar and intuitive when stated plainly, but the implications for policy are wide reaching and potentially transformative.

*Adam Mount, Ph.D. (@ajmount) is Senior Fellow and Director of the Defense Posture Project at the Federation of American Scientists.*

\*\*\*

## 4. Progressives Should Embrace the Politics of Defense

*By Loren DeJonge Schulman*

In his essay on what a progressive national security agenda should look like, Van Jackson proposes to stretch the common progressive position of anti-militarism to a more realist platform of military "sufficiency." In doing so, he brings attention to a serious gap in current defense politics. The stilted and superficial dialogue that passes for national security debate in American politics includes an active constituency for a "military first" (or military friendly) foreign policy, reflexively applying military tools to problems abroad and



inflating defense spending. There is also a weaker constituency, most present outside government, for a “military last” or “anti-militarist” policy, which would cut defense spending and end wars with similar reflexivity. Outside the apolitical “blob” of Washington, there is little interest in publicly debating the prudence or effectiveness of these agendas. The left, regardless of its broader “theory of security,” could fill some of this vacuum — and it is better situated to do so than conventional wisdom might suggest.<sup>70</sup>

## Democrats Drowning at the Water’s Edge

For the last two decades, there has been little political opportunity to question America’s role in the world. With some exception, relevant defense and security policies have been open to even less scrutiny. Questions about the ethical or effective application of force, the size of the defense budget, the success of a given military strategy, the utility of specific weapons platforms, and the return on investment from security cooperation are, at best, diversions. Anyone who attempts to challenge the status quo risks being greeted with political attacks about lacking patriotism or not supporting American troops.<sup>71</sup> But at a time of frequent missteps abroad on the part of the Trump administration, the space to question America’s foreign policy traditions may be widening.

The inability to pose legitimate questions about security policy is a particular flavor of political correctness, and because of it, the Democratic Party has all but disappeared in

---

<sup>70</sup> This essay was written at the close of the 2018 election cycle. While House Democrats, such as Congressman Adam Smith, have indicated a desire for a more robust national security oversight agenda, more time is needed to assess their success. Leo Shane III and Joe Gould, “The Military Could See Big Changes if Democrats Win Control of Congress,” *Military Times*, Oct. 23, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2018/10/23/the-military-could-see-big-changes-if-democrats-win-control-of-congress/>.

<sup>71</sup> “The Rhetorical Power of ‘Support Our Troops,’” *Economist*, Oct. 4, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/democracy-in-america/2017/10/04/the-rhetorical-power-of-support-our-troops>; Paul Blumenthal, “Veterans Super PAC Funded by Jeff Bezos Pulls Ad that Attacked Democrat as Traitor Post-9/11,” *Huffington Post*, Oct. 25, 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/brian-mast-lauren-baer-super-pac\\_us\\_5bd228b5e4boa8f17ef5ca49](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/brian-mast-lauren-baer-super-pac_us_5bd228b5e4boa8f17ef5ca49).

defense policy and politics.<sup>72</sup> The last two years have seen more than a dozen pieces on the left's lack of branded national security ideas.<sup>73</sup> Michael Walzer has attributed this gap to an intentional abstention: The default position of the left is that "the best foreign policy is a good domestic policy."<sup>74</sup> Jackson highlights modest resourcing and under-representation as justifications for the left's notable lack of a "theory of security" and the general subsuming of the debate under a big-tent "third way" liberalism. Traditional Democrats in the national security community (including me) have bristled at these criticisms, but would be hard-pressed to offer a distinctive and coherent political viewpoint.

Some see the Democratic Party's lack of a defined national security policy as something to celebrate. Declaring that politics "stops at the water's edge" of national security is a winning Bingo option at any think tank event. But this dictum stifles debate about the national interest and the proper application of national resources. Consequently, there are moral and political questions on defense and interventions abroad that have no meaningful forum.

This gap is particularly felt on Capitol Hill, where in the past security-minded Democrats have found political safe-harbor in a Republican-lite national security agenda — essentially blank-check support for Republicans on defense with, at most, a raised eyebrow from time to time. These policy positions require little analytical effort or political capital, and let Democrats occasionally posture as morally superior by emphasizing "non-military tools" of foreign policy.

The opposite alternative of a more rigid pacifism and anti-militarism, though common in the grassroots progressive community, has no consistently organized political presence on

---

<sup>72</sup> For example, the "Better Deal" agenda put forward by then-House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer gives little attention to national security matters: "A Better Deal," Senate Democrats, <https://www.democrats.senate.gov/abetterdeal>

<sup>73</sup> Zach Beauchamp, "Why Democrats Have No Foreign Policy Ideas," *Vox*, Sept. 5, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/5/16220054/democrats-foreign-policy-think-tanks>.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Walzer, "A Foreign Policy for the Left," *Dissent Magazine* (Spring 2014), <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/a-foreign-policy-for-the-left>.

the Hill and thus also escapes thorough interrogation.<sup>75</sup> For those outside the Beltway, opposition to all things military offers the refuge of principle without critical justification or analysis. For many Democrats, the Obama model was a strangely tolerable middle ground: a bipartisan budget mess made while a “responsible” president ramped up security interventions in enough secrecy to avoid nagging scrutiny or self-examination.

## Re-politicizing Defense

Despite the valiant efforts of some individuals, there is no political home for responsible defense debate, oversight, and accountability.<sup>76</sup> Yet, with determination, the left might find a real foothold in defense policy — without compromising progressive values. To be clear: There is substantial work to be done on figuring out what cohesive view of America’s role in the world the left can tolerate and advance. There is even greater work to be done on determining how to renew, reuse, and reform international institutions.<sup>77</sup> But any such

---

<sup>75</sup> The Congressional Progressive Caucus’s “People’s Budget,” for example, offers some details in its Sustainable Defense proposal regarding modernizing forces for future threats, but is largely focused on non-defense activities: “The People’s Budget: A Progressive Path Forward FY 2019,” Congressional Progressive Caucus, <https://cpc-grijalva.house.gov/uploads/Binder21.pdf>.

<sup>76</sup> For example, in his role on the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. John McCain was both a forceful check on the Department of Defense and an energetic reformer, but few on either side of the aisle matched his enthusiasm and intolerance for BS: Joe Gould, “With McCain Gone, Who Will Watch the Pentagon,” *Defense News*, Aug. 31, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2018/08/31/with-mccain-gone-who-will-watch-the-pentagon/>. Sens. Tim Kaine and Bob Corker have, after seventeen years, made minor headway in developing a revised Authorization for Use of Military Force — but even this watered down legislation has stalled: Scott R. Anderson and Molly E. Reynolds, “A Fast Track to Nowhere: ‘Expedited Procedures’ and the New AUMF Proposal,” *Lawfare*, April 19, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/fast-track-nowhere-expedited-procedures-and-new-aumf-proposal>; Sens. Jeff Merkley, Mike Lee, Bernie Sanders, and Chris Murphy, among others, have likewise pushed their own replacements or restrictions on the current war authorization, to include restricting support for military operations in Yemen: “Sanders, Lee, Murphy Introduce War Powers Resolution to End Unauthorized U.S. Military Involvement in Yemen,” Bernie Sanders, U.S. Senator for Vermont, Feb 28, 2018, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sanders-lee-murphy-introduce-war-powers-resolution-to-end-unauthorized-us-military-involvement-in-yemen>.

<sup>77</sup> Rebecca Friedman Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “The Day After Trump: American Grand Strategy and the New International Order,” *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 7–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1445353>.

agendas would be well served by embracing a set of principles that make clear-eyed debate and evaluation of defense policy and execution an asset, not an unforgiveable sin.

Critical analysis of defense affairs is too often left to the technocratic and comparatively powerless “blob,” which can write a mean op-ed or tweet, but has limited ability to engage the American people on its will and interests. And although Congress has willfully declared itself so that it cannot maintain meaningful oversight of national security,<sup>78</sup> its ability to stage and amplify policy debate for the American people is without parallel, and it has tremendous latent potential to restore greater balance in civil-military relations. Congress’s absence and the associated de-politicization of national security affairs is costly. For instance, the American public is deeply ambivalent about the 17-year conflict in Afghanistan and generally ignorant of the widespread activities of the war on terror.<sup>79</sup> This is unsurprising: Congress, too, is disaffected, often ignorant of where the U.S. military is even engaged,<sup>80</sup> and has made little headway into questioning or shaping this intervention. The most substantive and serious debate about executive war authorities and the effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism strategy has resulted in little more than a reauthorization proposal that still failed to move forward.<sup>81</sup>

Too many examples of political leaders’ stand-off or superficial approach to defense policy and execution abound. military superiority is generally viewed as sacrosanct, placed on “so high a pedestal as to render real debate meaningless.”<sup>82</sup> That reverence infantilizes defense budget debates. Thanking troops for their service is a politicized ritual that divorces politicians and their constituents from the intent and costs of that service. With decisions

---

<sup>78</sup> Richard Fontaine and Vance Serchuk, “Congress Should Oversee America’s Wars, Not Just Authorize Them,” *Lawfare*, June 7, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/congress-should-oversee-americas-wars-not-just-authorize-them>.

<sup>79</sup> Tanisha M. Fazal and Sarah Kreps, “The United States’ Perpetual War in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Affairs*, Aug. 20, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-america/2018-08-20/united-states-perpetual-war-afghanistan?cid=soc-tw-rdr>.

<sup>80</sup> Daniella Diaz, “Key Senators Say They Didn’t Know the US Had Troops in Niger,” *CNN*, Oct. 23, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/23/politics/niger-troops-lawmakers/index.html>

<sup>81</sup> Anderson and Reynolds, “A Fast Track to Nowhere.”

<sup>82</sup> Mara Karlin, “Policy Roundtable: The Pursuit of Military Superiority,” *Texas National Security Review*, June 26, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-pursuit-of-military-superiority/>.

on the needs of the U.S. military and sustaining legacy systems openly linked to the economies of congressional districts, it's understandable that skeptics of utilizing military tools have been unwilling to evaluate their merits. These must all change. While, at its worst, the political right treats the use of force abroad as a metric of patriotism and the size of the force as the measure of one's love of America, the political left ought to draw from its skepticism toward intervention and its faith in institutions to advance a more rational and accountable approach to national security.

For years, Robert Farley has highlighted that “progressives consistently underestimate the importance of discussions about military doctrine and technology,”<sup>83</sup> taking what Michael Walzer calls “shortcuts”<sup>84</sup> in their critiques of defense policy that relieve them from contributing to key debates. Instead of excusing themselves, the left should instead propose legitimate questions about major shifts in force employment and development: Will it work? What are its goals? What is the U.S. national security apparatus learning? Why didn't it work? Were U.S. objectives wrong? What did America change when it didn't work? Will America do it again? What could be improved? What should America do now?

## Joining the Conversation

Jackson's notion of what a progressive “wager” on national security might look like in practice is useful, filling the gap between the “Republican-lite” default and the stubbornness of anti-militarism. But the left's diversity of thought can accommodate a wider playing field of potential alternative approaches to security than even he proposes. A true pacifist movement on the Hill and on the campaign trail, dedicated to the advancement of non-military approaches but premised on analysis and logical arguments, would be a serious advancement in national security and should be welcomed by the most ardent military advocates. Likewise, a more prudent middle ground approach — one that is skeptical of, but open to, military might and intervention and demands a better return on investment of national security tools — should play a more prominent political role. The

---

<sup>83</sup> Robert Farley, “The LCS, Apple Pie, and Whatnot,” *Lawyers, Guns, and Money*, Jan. 4, 2011, <http://lawyersgunsmon.wpengine.com/2011/01/the-lcs-apple-pie-and-what-not - comments>.

<sup>84</sup> Walzer, “A Foreign Policy for the Left.”

full range of the left's national security spectrum should forcefully engage in oversight of the rationale for and quality of American forces and interventions abroad.

The left should therefore consider adopting a series of principles on defense matters — including criteria for the use of force — that apply to the military-friendly and anti-militarist left alike. In practice, this means acknowledging that there are valid political positions on matters of defense that lie somewhere in between “yes, and” and “no never” and that trivializing them is harmful to America's national security. There are alternatives to today's counterterror strategy and it would not be an insult to the military to debate them. It's entirely legitimate to study whether the military is equipped to face today's threats without being accused of retreating from the world or starting with an artificial budget cut. It's sensible to consider whether the planned growth of ground forces, a 350-ship Navy, or a 386-squadron Air Force are the right investments or political benchmarks.<sup>85</sup> These questions involve choices and values and should not be avoided under the umbrella of a supposed technocratic bipartisan agreement. Just as important, it's essential that the left avoid becoming a caricature of itself that promotes simplistic and superficial positions that set rigid, unserious standards. The left may not agree on the size or purpose of the military, but it can agree America should strive for informed oversight and accountability.

The bumper sticker of such principles is simple: Ask informed questions,<sup>86</sup> illuminate and demand accountability for failures, encourage fresh thinking, and bring the American people into the discussion without fear. That this is so simple is an embarrassment to the present state of the “debate.” In detail, these principles should include:

- Building the *right* force driven by security interests, not an inherently smaller force driven by an allergy to size. Arguing that the U.S. military is too large without clarifying what it should be expected to do and how is, at best, a lazy and an ill-informed reaction to sticker shock. There are valid questions — and a range

---

<sup>85</sup> Susanna Blume, “Numbers Game: How the Air Force Is Following the Army and Navy's Bad Example,” *Defense News*, Sept. 20, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/2018/09/20/numbers-game-how-the-air-force-is-following-the-army-and-navys-bad-example/>.

<sup>86</sup> Richard Fontaine and Vance Serchuk, “Congress Should Oversee America's Wars, Not Just Authorize Them.”

of plausible answers — about the appropriate mission and scope of America’s forces, and a worthwhile dialogue to be had on where risks in force structure should reside.

- Exploring fully how threat assessments impact military roles, missions, and investments. A rigid antipathy to conflict and intervention, or to the military itself, leaves the left out of conversations that determine how and where America spends its blood and treasure, and precludes the defense establishment from tackling questions important to the left (e.g., what does a world of accelerating climate change require of the U.S. military?). The left’s absence from attempts to set the analytic agenda for defense policy is dangerous.
- Engaging in more practical conversations about how military capabilities might be used, where, and why. Military platforms carry within them assumptions about the nature of U.S. strategy and interests that are poorly articulated in today’s defense authorizing environment. Most detailed political debate today emphasizes the cost of military platforms, or their associated acquisition processes, or, for legacy systems, the industrial base. As Robert Farley noted in 2011, “Analysts, institutions, and politicians tend to respond to the arguments they see, rather than those that they don’t.”<sup>87</sup>
- Recruiting, retaining, and promoting the military and civilian skill sets and imagination necessary for today’s and tomorrow’s security challenges. The mish-mash of human capital and talent management processes of today’s Department of Defense, paired with a legacy focus on capacity, the booming costs of military personnel, a growing civil-military divide, and a growing gap in the military’s high-technical skills, spell a looming disaster for future military manpower. The left must treat this as a strategic priority rather than a mere bureaucratic matter.
- Increasing transparency to the public on the manner, costs, risks, intent, and success or failure of military interventions. As I wrote with Alice Friend, the current approach of military secrecy and unwillingness to pursue an “airing of grievances” about past strategic and operational failure “assumes that domestic support for U.S. military engagements can be sustained in an information vacuum. It draws on a reservoir of public faith in the military while also limiting

---

<sup>87</sup> Farley, “The LCS, Apple Pie, and Whatnot.”

the public's ability to make an informed decision. This is a losing gamble.”<sup>88</sup> The left should reset this dynamic.

- Deliberately connecting debates on America's capabilities and political investments in preventing and resolving conflicts to the more mature debates on how to prepare to fight the nation's wars. Diplomacy, development, economics, and intelligence demand modernization just as military forces do, and they need to be far better at measuring and communicating their value. The left should push the political dialogue on these matters beyond mere talking-points.
- Ensuring that any military action America does engage in has clear goals, is limited in scope, is sustainable for the duration, and is assessed in terms of fully-burdened costs to the military, the broader national security community (intelligence analysts, diplomats, aid workers, contractors, and more), U.S. allies, and local populations. Exploring these matters is not pedantic or risky in the face of threats. It is the only responsible option, and the left should force these discussions.
- Sustaining engaged and thoughtful interest, oversight, and civil skepticism of all military and non-military intervention activities abroad. The beginning of an intervention should not be the high point of political energy. It is shameful that the progress of the war in Afghanistan, the viability of the U.S. counterterrorism strategy, the occasional airstrikes in Syria, and much more escape serious oversight.
- Advancing civil-military relations with respectful skepticism of military employment; unconditional support for service members, families, and veterans; and resolve to right wrongs of past failures.

The left — in all its forms — should embrace the necessity of active participation and serious debate beyond the water's edge. That's how to make national security more democratic, transparent, and therefore accountable. What could be more progressive than that?

*Loren DeJonge Schulman is the Deputy Director of Studies and Leon E. Panetta Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security. She is the co-host of the national security podcast Bombshell and has held senior staff positions at the National Security Council and*

---

<sup>88</sup> Loren DeJonge Schulman and Alice Friend, “The Pentagon's Transparency Problem,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2018-05-02/pentagons-transparency-problem>.



*Department of Defense. The views expressed hers alone and not representative of her organization.*

\*\*\*

## 5. The Free-World Strategy Progressives Need

*By Thomas Wright*

Attempts to craft a foreign policy for the next progressive president must begin with a consideration of the international situation, not with general principles or domestic politics. To do otherwise runs a grave risk of formulating a policy that is wildly out of sync with the world as it is. Depending on the threat environment, a progressive foreign policy could emphasize many of the elements discussed in Van Jackson’s essay in this roundtable — universal institutions, multilateral cooperation, arms control — or rearmament, deterrence, and alliances. But it depends on the circumstances. Just consider the case of Britain’s postwar Labour government, which pursued left wing policies at home but built a nuclear weapon, helped to create NATO, and took a hardline anti-Soviet position.

In assessing the international situation, the United States must ask whether and how world events impinge on vital American interests. Those interests are laid down in the preamble to the constitution, which states that the purpose of the United States is

to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.<sup>89</sup>

Foreign policy and national security are fundamentally about ensuring a healthy international system in which this free society can thrive and prosper.

---

<sup>89</sup> U.S. Constitution, Preamble, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>.

With every passing month, it is clear that the international situation is deteriorating rapidly. From Latin America, to Europe, to Asia, the world is seeing the rise of a neo-authoritarianism that seeks to roll back freedom where it currently resides and advance its own global reach. It is not monolithic and contains internal contradictions, but this authoritarian trend packs enough of a punch to qualify as a coherent alternative to a free and open society. It is able to take advantage of disruptive technological change and dislocations in the economies of democracies as well as severe political dysfunctions and polarization in U.S. domestic politics. This is much more than a geopolitical clash along the frontier of the South China Sea or Ukraine. It is a clash of societies that directly affects America's domestic affairs, whether it is the health of democracy, the level of strife between various groups and cultures, the freedom of the media, the nature of capitalism, or the integrity of U.S. critical infrastructure.

The rise of neo-authoritarianism is not the only thing going on of course. There are at least two other existential challenges facing America, as well as a myriad of significant problems. The first is a global economic model that remains prone to financial crisis and has major flaws — including allowing China's unfair practices and facilitating massive corporate tax avoidance — that disadvantage modern democratic market economies. The second is climate change, which we now have reason to believe will result in catastrophic effects by 2040, well within the lifetime of most Americans.<sup>90</sup> In addition to these challenges, the United States faces a continuing threat from terrorist networks, North Korea, and Iran, among others.

But the neo-authoritarian challenge is the greatest strategic problem America faces because it involves opponents of great capability and global reach with the intention of undermining the United States and with the ability to adapt and counter U.S. actions to remedy the situation. These facts distinguish this challenge from the problems of globalization and climate change. Dealing with it will require a level of public support and national action that necessitates it being at the center of American foreign policy. If it remains just one issue among many, the United States will fail in whatever objectives it sets out.

---

<sup>90</sup> "Global Warming of 1.5 ° C," Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, October 2018, [http://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15\\_spm\\_final.pdf](http://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_spm_final.pdf).

## The Rise of Neo-Authoritarian Great Powers

After the Cold War, Western leaders, including almost everyone on the left, believed that Russia and China would converge on a single model of liberal order as they traded and engaged with the West. In this vision, all states would share the same challenges — like climate change, terrorism, economic volatility, and nuclear proliferation — that would eclipse old geopolitical differences. The expectations of convergence came to an end because Russian and Chinese leaders concluded that if the liberal order succeeded globally, it would pose an existential threat to their regimes. These leaders believed that the West was orchestrating color revolutions in their own societies. They worried that Western leaders would break any promise of support, as President Barack Obama did with Hosni Mubarak in Egypt.<sup>91</sup> They feared the autonomy and power of the free press — as evidenced by the role the *New York Times* played in uncovering mass corruption among the Chinese political leadership in 2012 — and they worried about the role that social media and search engines might play in shaping the views of the youth in their countries.<sup>92</sup> To put this in the parlance of foreign policy, they felt more threatened by America’s soft power, or the power of its society, than by traditional military strength.

They were not wrong — at least not from their perspective. Indeed, most progressives believed and hoped that soft power would sow the seeds of change overseas. This is a point worth remembering when U.S. officials or pundits talk about the importance of a whole of government approach and the power of example — it is precisely this characteristic of the Western system that worries Moscow and Beijing the most. With this diagnosis, China and Russia began to push back and sought to create a world safe for authoritarianism. That

---

<sup>91</sup> On Russia’s fear of an America inspired color revolution, see Julia Ioffe, “What Putin Really Wants,” *Atlantic*, (January/February 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/01/putins-game/546548/>. On China’s, see Gideon Rachman, “China’s Strange Fear of a Color Revolution,” *Financial Times*, Feb. 9, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/9b5a2ed2-af96-11e4-b42e-00144feab7de>.

<sup>92</sup> David Barboza, “Billions in Hidden Riches for Family of Chinese Leader,” *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/26/business/global/family-of-wen-jiabao-holds-a-hidden-fortune-in-china.html?module=inline>.

meant weakening the free press<sup>93</sup> and social media<sup>94</sup>; repressing non-governmental organizations;<sup>95</sup> establishing the means of influencing Western societies, including by interfering in their domestic politics and promoting division and discord;<sup>96</sup> coercing private companies into abiding by China's wishes;<sup>97</sup> using corruption to gain leverage internationally;<sup>98</sup> and weakening the concept and means of operationalizing universal values.<sup>99</sup>

There is a significant geopolitical dimension to the competition: China and Russia really do seek a sphere of influence in their respective regions and such ambitions are dangerous and destabilizing. But the competition is rooted in a clash of social models — a free world and a neo-authoritarian world — that directly affects how people live. This clash has spilled over into western societies and directly challenges the democratic way of life. None of the major protagonists in this competition seek a major conflict. And although one could occur inadvertently, the most likely scenario is one of a prolonged peacetime competition with measures short of war.

---

<sup>93</sup> *Darkened Screen: Constraints on Foreign Journalists in China*, Pen America, Sept. 22, 2016, [https://pen.org/sites/default/files/PEN\\_foreign\\_journalists\\_report\\_FINAL\\_online%5B1%5D.pdf](https://pen.org/sites/default/files/PEN_foreign_journalists_report_FINAL_online%5B1%5D.pdf);

<sup>94</sup> *Forbidden Feeds: Government Controls on Social Media in China*, Pen America, March 13, 2018, [https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/PEN-America\\_Forbidden-Feeds-report-6.6.18.pdf](https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/PEN-America_Forbidden-Feeds-report-6.6.18.pdf).

<sup>95</sup> “*They Target My Human Rights Work as a Crime*: Annual Report on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in China (2016)”, Chinese Human Rights Defenders, February 2017, <https://www.nchrd.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/annual-report.pdf>.

<sup>96</sup> Peter Mattis, “Contrasting Russia and China’s Influence Operations,” *War on The Rocks*, Jan. 16, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/contrasting-chinas-russias-influence-operations/>.

<sup>97</sup> Peter Harrell, Elizabeth Rosenberg, and Edoardo Saravalle, *China’s Use of Coercive Economic Measures*, The Center for a New America Security, (June 2018), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/chinas-use-of-coercive-economic-measures>.

<sup>98</sup> Christopher Balding, “Why Democracies Are Turning Against One Belt One Road,” *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 24, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-10-24/why-democracies-are-turning-against-belt-and-road>.

<sup>99</sup> Theodore Piccone, *China’s Long Game on Human Rights at the United Nations*, Brookings Institution, (September 2018), [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FP\\_20181009\\_china\\_human\\_rights.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FP_20181009_china_human_rights.pdf).

The clash of free societies and neo-authoritarianism shapes almost everything else. It makes multilateral cooperation much more difficult. It makes military interventions much more costly. It makes the global economy more volatile. It damages democracy and tolerance while empowering kleptocrats and xenophobia. And if it continues unchecked, the result will be a world, and an America, that is much less free and prosperous than it is today.

## Possible Strategic Responses

There are three possible responses to this neo-authoritarian challenge. The first is to hunker down and play defense. The second is to accommodate it, in the hope of cooperation. And, the third is to push back and compete with neo-authoritarian states diplomatically, politically, economically, and militarily.

### *I. Playing Defense*

The United States could focus exclusively on blunting the authoritarian challenge at home by securing voting machines, reforming election law, placing restrictions on investment in critical infrastructure, and working with social media companies to call out fake news and propaganda. The United States could go even further and help other countries to do the same.

This would help, but it is not enough. New technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) may well be offense dominant. It is impossible to muster an effective defense that will stop all cyber attacks, prevent penetration of critical infrastructure, and render fake news worthless. Moreover, what needs to be defended is vast and diverse, encompassing the private and public sectors. Defense is not enough. America needs to think about deterrence — how to threaten sufficient costs that will change the calculus of its adversaries.

Moreover, a purely defensive approach does not address how to think about the geopolitical dimension of the competition — should Russia and China be allowed a sphere of influence in their respective regions and is the United States competing with them to shape global rules and norms? This approach is also silent regarding countries that have become more authoritarian in recent years.

## *II. Accommodate Rivals*

In an important article, Peter Beinart recently wrote that progressives should not try to out-hawk the GOP on Russia, North Korea, or China. Instead, they should abandon U.S. primacy in favor of a system of spheres of influence in which China has much more of a say in East Asia, including Taiwan, and Russia in Eastern Europe.<sup>100</sup> Beinart's argument is that the United States is overstretched and close to insolvent in its national power. Other versions of this argument have been made by academic realists, such as Barry Posen.<sup>101</sup>

Beinart correctly understands that if Russia and China are to be bought off it will have to be with something more substantial than extra votes in Western institutions. But his strategy is badly mistaken. There would be no greater act of imperialism than sitting down with a hostile power to give away independent democracies against their will. What is progressive about that? A spheres-of-influence system will also run up against the same problem it always has — the lines of demarcation are never clear and it will be inherently unstable. Hardliners in Beijing and Moscow will see an opportunity and demand more. Also, why stop with Russia and China? Others will soon get the message that if they throw their weight around they too can have a claim on their own sphere. A spheres-of-influence system would make war much more likely than other approaches and it would gravely damage America's vital interests.

## *III. Responsible Competition for the Free World*

The third option is that the United States should compete with authoritarian states to preserve and strengthen an international system that protects freedom and liberty at

---

<sup>100</sup> Peter Beinart, "Shield of the Republic: A New Democratic Foreign Policy," *Atlantic*, Sept. 16, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/shield-of-the-republic-a-democratic-foreign-policy-for-the-trump-age/570010/>.

<sup>101</sup> See for instance, Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

home.<sup>102</sup> This would entail moving away from universal concepts of international order and toward a free world model whereby America seeks to bolster democratic societies, to inoculate them against illiberal forces at home and abroad, and to deter revisionist powers.

The primary drawback of this strategy is that it risks starting a new Cold War with China and Russia. However, it is only by pushing back and standing up for free and open societies that America can achieve some level of deterrence and establish a new equilibrium.

Preemptive concessions to great power rivals would only beget more demands and would leave the United States in a vastly weaker position. Competing with neo-authoritarian states is the best way to ensure that free and open societies can survive and prosper and it also holds out the best prospect of peaceful relations with other great powers.

### **A Free World Strategy in More Detail**

A free world strategy is not a re-run of the Cold War. Rather, America should seek to adopt a strategy of responsible competition that is cognizant of the differences between Russia and China, recognizes the need for continued cooperation on matters of mutual interest, like climate change, and avoids escalating to levels that would risk a major-power war. Space constraints prevent full elaboration of the strategy here but the key elements include the following:

- The United States should focus on the threats posed by neo-authoritarianism to Western societies, including through political interference, attacks on the media, pressure on the private sector, cyber attacks, and the challenges posed by technological

---

<sup>102</sup> What is proposed here is a particular variant of a strategy of competing with China and Russia. This draws on Thomas Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Future of American Power*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); and Wright, “The Return to Great Power Competition Was Inevitable,” *Atlantic*, Sept. 12, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/liberal-international-order-free-world-trump-authoritarianism/569881/>. For examples of competitive strategies with a different emphasis see Wess Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel, *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning,” *Foreign Affairs*, (February/ March 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-02-13/china-reckoning>.

innovations, such as AI, 5G, and Quantum. This would require a national conversation and mobilization to effectively compete.

- The challenge of neo-authoritarianism is of greater strategic importance than the Middle East or counter-terrorism operations and should therefore be reflected in budgets, personnel, and the time dedicated to addressing this problem. It also means withdrawing forces from Afghanistan and ending support for the war in Yemen.
- Deter revisionist powers from creating a spheres of influence order in Europe and Asia and ensuring that America's democratic allies can participate and prosper in a free and open international order, including in their regions.
- Engaging in responsible competition means preserving cooperation with China on matters of mutual interest, particularly the global economy and climate change. America should avoid competitive strategies that seek to collapse the Chinese state.
- The United States must transform its alliances so they can address these authoritarian threats to free societies. Currently U.S. alliances are completely ill-equipped to do so. America should consider a global alliance structure dedicated to addressing the threat and to creating new rules and institutions that reflect U.S. values.
- The United States must be more willing to use power and leverage in pursuit of its strategic goals than the Obama administration was. This includes getting much tougher on authoritarian allies — such as Hungary and Turkey — who are drifting toward the neo-authoritarian camp.
- The United States should calibrate its interdependence and integration with China to reduce America's vulnerability to Beijing's strategic decisions.

The Middle East is a particularly thorny problem that largely exists outside of this conceptual framework. Withdrawing from the region is tempting but carries with it an extremely high risk of contagion whereby problems in the region would worsen and threaten vital interests elsewhere. The collapse of Saudi Arabia or Jordan, or civil conflict in Turkey, would have a devastating impact — refugee flows could destroy the European Union, the Islamic State could return, and conflict could spread throughout the region and beyond. On the other hand, military engagement runs the risk of a forever war with high human costs that distracts from the primary strategic challenge facing America. There is no obvious answer. The least bad option is to continue to engage while being much tougher on America's Gulf allies, including being willing to deploy leverage, such as ending arms sales.



But, regardless of the side one comes down on, it is vital that decision-makers are honest about the horrible trade-off America faces and outline ways of mitigating the cost of their chosen strategy. If the United States decides to leave, it must deal with the contagion problem — how to prevent instability in one part of the region from spilling over. If it decides to stay, it has to deal with maintaining problematic allies.

## The Defense Budget

Progressives need to familiarize themselves with the substantive debate surrounding the defense budget and move past misleading generalities that compare the overall size of the budget with that of other countries. Such comparisons are commonplace (e.g., the United States spends more on defense than the next seven major powers combined) and lead to a complacency about American power.<sup>103</sup> But, they are mistaken for three reasons: 1) Russia and China lie about their defense spending and conceal its true levels, 2) it is not the overall level of power that matters but the balance in particular contested theaters — the United States has to project power globally whereas Russia and China can concentrate on their regions — and 3) rapid technological change has the potential to enable China to leapfrog over the United States. Moreover, America should try to avoid allowing rival powers to believe they can engage in a fair fight with U.S. forces — something that could weaken deterrence by giving a risk-tolerant rival reason to think that aggression may pay, especially in regions where they have disproportionately larger interests than they think the United States does.

Moreover, most of defense spending is not flexible — the costs are committed too far into the future, whether it is procurement of new weapons systems or personnel. Immediate cuts would have to come out of current operations or research and development. Cutting operations to save money, rather than for strategic reasons, damages readiness and increases the risk of conflict. Cutting research and development means the United States

---

<sup>103</sup> See for example, Daniel Bessner, “What Does Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Think About the South China Sea?” *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/17/opinion/democratic-party-cortez-foreign-policy.html>.

would be at a serious disadvantage in competing with China. Experts on both sides of the aisle believe that the cuts to defense spending under the Budget Control Act (commonly known as the Sequester), included at the insistence of the Republican Party, did significant damage to the national defense.<sup>104</sup>

One can certainly argue that the defense budget allocates resources inefficiently to deal with the challenges America faces. Should the United States really be building new aircraft carriers in an era when AI, precision missiles, or advanced submarines may render them almost useless? Surely it should be making the necessary investments in science and technology and human capital to compete. But the conversation on the budget must recognize that the United States faces a monumental task in reforming and improving its military for this new era. Adjustments need to be made over the long term and for strategic reasons. The focus must be on modernization, improving competitiveness and increasing capabilities so that the United States has the right kind of military for the coming challenges. How to do that is the needed debate.

## Dealing with the Global Economy and Climate

Nothing in a free world strategy precludes taking action on other issues. In fact, it necessitates reforming the global economy since protecting against volatility and crisis and ensuring that the system works for all citizens are vital components of ensuring the free world succeeds and prospers. This could be accomplished by initiating a conversation with America's allies that moves beyond market access and regulatory alignment to talk about shared concerns about globalization — inequality, the decoupling of labor and productivity, a financial system that is too big to fail, corporate tax avoidance, and China's mercantilist model.

Climate change is a global phenomenon by definition but the solutions to it must be implemented at the domestic level. To effectively address it, the United States and other major powers need a massive overhaul of their national economies. Thus far, Americans

---

<sup>104</sup> Jonathan Weissman and Ashley Parker, "Acceptance of Defense Cuts Signals Shift in GOP Focus," *New York Times*, Feb. 24, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/25/us/politics/democrats-and-republicans-miscalculate-on-automatic-cuts.html>.

have shown insufficient will for an overhaul of the scale and scope required. And so, Democratic leaders have gravitated toward more modest approaches to get things started while Republicans have almost entirely ignored the problem. There is, of course, an international component, but much of this approach depends on American, Chinese, and Indian action — only if these societies transform their economies to dramatically cut emissions, can a solution be found. This raises one important question for U.S. national security strategy: Should the United States go easy on China to secure its cooperation on climate change? The answer is no. To do so would actually provide Beijing with leverage that it would be tempted to use. It would be wiser to ring-fence climate change and agree that, given that it is a matter of vital interest to all parties, cooperation should continue even if the major powers are competing on other fronts.

## The Politics of Foreign Policy

Progressives were slow to realize the challenge posed by authoritarianism, particularly from Russia and China. During his presidency, Obama repeatedly dismissed Russia as a regional power and underestimated the threat it posed to the democratic process in 2016. Several Obama administration officials now acknowledge that they also failed to fully comprehend and respond to the competitive nature of the challenge from China.<sup>105</sup> It was commonplace for senior officials to talk about the arc of history and 21<sup>st</sup>-century politics as if the dangers of the 20th century had aged out, never to return. Progressives must reflect seriously upon these mistakes and remedy them ahead of a possible progressive administration in 2021. A free world strategy does this. It is consistent with progressive and democratic values but also represents an appropriate departure from Obama's foreign policy.

When pundits talk about the past — protecting the liberal international order created in the late 1940s — or obscure far away places, people can tune out. Progressives must talk about the future and relate it directly to people's lived experience. They must tap into ongoing debates in free societies about technological change. The strategy proposed above allows

---

<sup>105</sup> Campbell and Ratner, "The China Reckoning." See also Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

for precisely that. It is a sad reality that Americans have been more frequently moved to action in foreign policy by perceived threats than by hopes of creating a better world. America should never exaggerate the problems it faces but neither should it ignore them where they exist.

One of the advantages of a free world strategy is that it is an American strategy, not a partisan one. There is enough flexibility within the concept to allow progressives and conservatives to tailor it for their own goals. A progressive strategy may seek to build a free world that reduces inequality and put some limits on market forces, whereas a conservative strategy may seek to reduce regulation. Reasonable people can differ about the type of free world they want to build.

In the immediate future, a free world strategy also allows Democrats to draw a stark contrast with Trump's policies. The vast majority of Republicans believe in the free world but Trump does not. He prefers authoritarian strong men. He would erode key freedoms — such as freedom of the press — if he were politically stronger. In many ways, he sympathizes with the Russian and Chinese vision of international order. Trump is a reminder that this competition is not just between states; it is also within them.

Many progressives may well prefer to do less in the world and retrench. That is not what this era requires of them. The United States will need to do more in some areas and less in others. Supporters of a free society — whether progressives, centrists, or conservatives — face an existential challenge that can only be met with an active and competitive foreign policy.

***Thomas Wright** is Director of the Center for the U.S. and Europe and a Senior Fellow in the Project in International Order and Strategy at the Brookings Institution. He is author of All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the Future of American Power.*