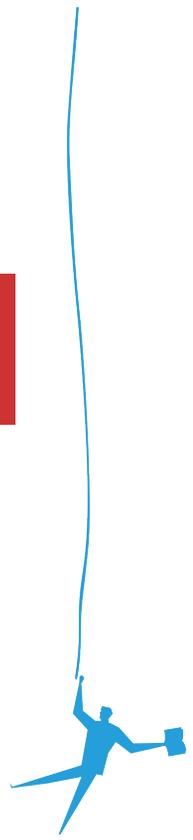


WAGERING ON A PROGRESSIVE VERSUS LIBERAL THEORY OF NATIONAL SECURITY

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In this featured roundtable essay for Vol. 2, Iss. 1, Van Jackson lays out a vision for progressive foreign policy.

Progressives are in search of a collective voice on foreign policy and national security.¹ 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.² 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 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.³ Authentically

progressive ideas are scarce in the Washington think tank landscape, and progressive megadonors tend to finance domestic policies and projects, not foreign policy.⁴

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.”⁵ 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.

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

1 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/>.

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

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

4 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>.

5 Beauchamp, “Why Democrats Have No Foreign Policy Ideas.”

enterprise.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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..."⁹ More controversially, there are strongly ingrained biases against the military in some quarters of the left.¹⁰ "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.

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."¹¹ 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.¹² 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 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

6 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>.

7 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>.

8 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).

9 Walzer, *A Foreign Policy for the Left*, 48.

10 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>.

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

12 Jackson, "American Military Superiority and the Pacific Primacy Myth."

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 make¹³ — 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.¹⁴ 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,¹⁵ though with some 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.¹⁶ The idea that “[w]e should act abroad only with those who share our commitments and then, only in ways consistent with those commitments”¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸

Because one of the principal threats to U.S. security in the progressive view is the spread of authoritarianism and fascism,¹⁹ 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 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.

13 Bessner, “What Does Ocasio-Cortez Think About the South China Sea?”

14 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).

15 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_t_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-states/2018-09-04/toward-neo-progressive-foreign-policy>; 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*.

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

17 Walzer, *A Foreign Policy for the Left*, 34.

18 Walzer, *A Foreign Policy for the Left*, 45.

19 Sanders, “A New Authoritarian Axis Demands a Progressive Front.”

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.²⁰ 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”²¹ 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 and the rule of law, and can help attenuate conflict — all of which favors justice and egalitarianism. But some international institutions must be repurposed or reformed to 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...”²²

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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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, 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

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

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

22 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>.

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

24 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>.

Table 1. Comparing Progressive and Liberal Internationalist Theories of Security

Default Liberal Internationalism	Progressive Internationalism
Military Superiority	Military Sufficiency
Alliances	Democratic Alliances
International Institutions	Reformed International Institutions
Economic Interdependence	Mutual Threat Reduction

threats by making threats — is not an end in itself but rather a means of buying time.²⁵ 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 place of “mutually assured stability.”²⁶ 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.

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. ●

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25 Van Jackson, “Stop Confusing Deterrence with Strategy,” *Diplomat*, July 6, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/07/stop-confusing-deterrence-with-strategy/>.

26 *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>.