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President Donald J. Trump at the UN General Assembly in September 2018 | Photo courtesy of Shealah Craighead via the White House's Flickr Account

A Realistic, Progressive Foreign Policy in the United States

By Dan Plesch | Published on www.thebaraza.org on November 17, 2020

Introduction

A progressive international agenda needs to begin with a frank assessment of the present strategic culture and connect domestic and global progressive priorities. Global threats such as climate change and nuclear weapons have not been prioritized, while national treasure is squandered in endless wars. The national security necessity that Covid-19 be contained and eliminated provides a deadly reminder that in an interconnected world national action requires international coordination. An international policy that is effective for Americans needs to network progressive policy at home and abroad.

Covid-19 and its economic and social impact will accelerate already perilous instability. A militarized and corporate-driven international policy has led to an unnecessary and disastrous convergence of underlying economic, military and ideological dangers. Over the past four decades the progress in social and economic security after 1945 has been discarded in favour of unlimited corporate power, recreating the destabilizing poverty and inequality that existed prior to World Wars One and Two. Under the past two Republican presidents, global weapons agreements painstakingly developed to defuse Cold War tensions have been shredded. The dangers of climate chaos are not being met. And the United Nations, bequeathed us by the World War II generation, has been undermined and then vilified for ineffectiveness. The United Nations was crafted by FDR and the Allies to [win the war against fascism](#) and build the peace.

In a toxic combination today, material challenges combine with the ideological threats. Confederate and Nazi flags fly together, exemplifying the integration of the national and international. Recent action to remove Confederate symbols – loudly rebuked by President Trump in a transparent appeal to the racist elements within his political base – underscore the deep divisions in the American polity that are undermining the possibilities of genuine progress on racial and economic justice. The Republic is under threat at home and the aspirational values that led a “free world” no longer represent American politics today. The worst values of the old world brought slavery and genocide and now threaten progress altogether. There is no future in reviving the nightmares of the past.

A Failed Strategic Culture

The “unipolar moment” of unchallenged U.S. superiority touted by analysts across the political spectrum at the end of the Cold War is now a distant memory despite unlimited military spending. Since the collapse of communism, the U.S. foreign policy establishment – whose repeated action scholars such as Colin Gray and Jack Snyder have defined as a

strategic culture establishing the parameters of a nation's policy options – has presided over a unique reduction in U.S. influence under such banners as ‘The toughest policy is the best policy’ and “We don’t do social work.” The defeats in Afghanistan and Iraq have not brought a change in the momentum of established policy. Thirty years after the collapse of communism, America is experiencing an accelerating decline of its soft power accelerated by the misuse of and disproportionate concentration on military power. Russia, with an economy the size of Canada, is alleged to be a major threat again. China is surrounded by the US and its allies, its armed forces outgunned and overmatched. Nevertheless, the challenges posed by Moscow and Beijing are front and center in a U.S. national defense strategy that clings to a militarized policy at a time when the most urgent challenges the United States and the world face are not military in nature.

These failures are the failures of the dominant foreign and military policy community over the last thirty years. Given a blank check by US taxpayers to assure American leadership, that leadership has been squandered. Even today there is little self-awareness of the harm inflicted on America by the proponents of the foreign and military policies of the last three decades.

International militarism has created rather than contained or prevented conflict. A SWAT team policy has been as counterproductive overseas as at home. Israeli training of US police, foreign investment in lobbying the US policy process and refugees arriving at the southern border fleeing conflicts fuelled by US policy all underscore the dysfunctional nature of current U.S. policies.

The failure in U.S. political-military leadership should not excuse or exclude the academic analysts and policy experts who continue to enable it. There is little support for a much needed and more nuanced soft-power policy. However, the late work of the universally studied classic realist Hans Morgenthau provides foundational support for what is needed today. His neglected – or suppressed – 1969 book a *New Foreign Policy for*

the United States gives a mandate for a shift away from force and for cultural change in response to the existential threat of the bomb. In this sense new progressive strategies can and should be seen as a revival of classic realism in the nuclear age. The defining strategic issue of our time is whether societies can face the reality that industrial society is destroying itself. So far US strategic culture has largely ignored this reality.

Constructing Peace and Prosperity

An international policy that works for Americans would recognise that foreign and domestic policy should implement the same values – rooting the international in the local and stopping an import-export trade in reactionary politics. Scholars have observed militarization of policies through “securitization” — for example by presuming to use the military to defend against climate change impacts. We now need to reverse this process and promote the civilianization of security policy.

Demilitarized security, gun control, public health, fair elections, a green economy, immigration, racism, sexual violence and corporate power are key issues in US and global politics. Many practitioners know this well, but until now these dynamics have not resulted in an adequate international agenda in the Congress or the Administration.

A more effective international policy should address the fundamental issues referenced above, and domestic constituencies should effectively combine with overseas allies. History has instructive precedents. As long ago as the 1800s, Choctaw victims of the United States raised money for the starving Irish subjects of the British Empire, and the Irish recently sent reciprocal aid to indigenous American Covid-19 sufferers. This is a reminder that the United States needs to reconcile with its own near-abroad – the indigenous peoples within the U.S.

More Security with Less Weapons

At home, public safety may replace militarized policing. Necessary reductions and conditions on US military power abroad need a similar strategy. [Weapons systems and force structure](#) are excessive and can safely be reduced. In parallel, there must be increased support for service personnel and veterans, not least for those with PTSD and in Covid-ravaged facilities.

The Sustainable Defense Task Force

The United States and its allies can be adequately defended for far less money than is currently devoted to the Pentagon and related nuclear warhead work at the Department of Energy, which now totals roughly \$750 billion per year. That's the conclusion of the Center for International Policy's Sustainable Defense Task Force (SDTF), a group of former White House, Congressional, and Pentagon budget experts; former military officers; and independent, non-governmental experts from across the political spectrum. The task force identifies over \$1.2 trillion in savings over the next decade that could be yielded by adopting a strategy that avoids unnecessary and counterproductive wars, reduces the U.S. global military footprint, takes a more realistic view of the major security challenges facing the United States, and reduces waste and inefficiency. Instead, for most of this century we have had a military-first approach that has imposed immense costs without providing commensurate security benefits. A new approach would reduce the size of the U.S. military by at least 10% in keeping with a non-interventionist posture; roll back the Pentagon's \$1.2 trillion nuclear weapons modernization plan; cut the Pentagon's use of costly and often redundant private contractors; and abandon the unrealistic goal of a 355-ship Navy in favor of a smaller force that would not seek to "cover the globe," but instead would maintain a capacity to surge into areas of tension in a crisis. The full report of the SDTF is available [here](#).

As [some 50 organisations have argued](#), US global policy can bring together and mutually reinforce efforts with our partners to address the regional cases of North Korea, Iran, Israel-Palestine and Central America. Each of these has been the focus of reform policies developed by NGOs consisting of a complex of political, social, economic strategies that can be integrated on a global basis. In establishment circles, re-engagement with China and Russia has so far been met at best with caution, if not outright hostility. Proposals on nuclear arms control have unfortunately meant little given the overmatch the US retains in general military forces, and a generation of US-led destruction of arms control. Beginning with the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, the decay of conventional arms control agreements in Europe, and most recently the withdrawal from Intermediate Nuclear Forces and Open Skies Treaties, these foundations of war prevention have all been destroyed. The US-Russian Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty remain. Every opportunity should be taken to renew START and strengthen the NPT at its fifth yearly review meeting in 2021. Hints by the Trump administration of a return to nuclear testing must be firmly rebuffed. Nuclear weapons must never be detonated to see if they work. They do. This is abundantly clear as the world commemorates the 75th anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Attempting to rescue and repair the Cold War era treaties is insufficient, however. A new global architecture of weapons control is needed, upgrading classic arms control for the information age.

Global and domestic gun control have similar dynamics and need to be connected at the political and policy levels. The lack of domestic gun control is directly linked to the global proliferation of firearms, where international efforts led by developing world states need help from U.S. policymakers and non-governmental groups other than the ever-present National Rifle Association. And the Trump administration's deregulation

of U.S. gun exports – which will only make matters worse by evading Congressional control of key deals – must be reversed.

An example of new opportunities in global security is the Open Skies Treaty. Conceived at the dawn of the space age by President Eisenhower and realized by G.H.W. Bush and Michael Gorbachev to help end the Cold War, Open Skies provided for mutual overflights of military bases from Europe to California – using verification to build trust. Wrecked by Trump, we can restore and upgrade it. In the twenty-first century Google Earth offers the possibility of global military transparency. Whether open access as “wiki-weapons-tracker” or subject to Treaty a comprehensive [Global Weapons Tracking Service](#) could be in operation in months. Glimpses of the possible can be seen in the conflict analyses of the non-governmental organizations the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and Bellingcat, and the satellite photos of North Korea used by NGOs such as the Federation of American Scientists and numerous other organizations. Public access to a secret world long privileged to intelligence services can defuse conflict and render moot debates over adversaries’ hidden assets.

[Freezing weapons production and supply](#) pending review and international response can be an important and parallel source of stability. The top three categories for such moratoria are: obsolete twentieth century platforms, military supplies for regimes that engage in torture, and redundant and destabilizing nuclear weapons systems in light of the overmatch the US currently enjoys.

Track and Freeze can be accompanied by *weapons Regulation and Elimination*. The crucial verification component is no longer a major challenge. There is an opportunity to integrate regional nuclear weapons control initiatives in the Middle East and Asia with global US-Russia talks. For China and Russia regional issues and U.S. non-nuclear global strike are tied to nuclear arms issues. But the Trump administration’s gambit of attempting to tie New START extension to changes in Chinese nuclear policy should be resisted. Local and regional

powers seek security and reassurance concerning the three major nuclear powers. At present, regional powers, whether North Korea, Japan, Iran or India and Pakistan see weapons that can only target their regions as vital strategic assets while eyeing those with global reach owned by the US, Russia, France and China with suspicion. For their part Russia and China have regional concerns to consider when engaging with the US, and the US has a role in protecting states neighbouring China and Russia.

The regional range missile treaty- known formally as the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, or INF – was a US-Soviet deal which Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested globalizing back in 2007, a non-starter to states with only those weapons. At any rate the treaty has now been destroyed by President Trump. Now the US proposes adding China to US-Russia talks on missiles with global reach. The opportunity exists to satisfy many security concerns by extending the INF ban to *all* missiles with ranges of those prohibited to Saddam Hussein back in 1991 – 150km.

Verified weapons tracking reinforced by selective weapons freezes can provide momentum towards a safer world. Such agreements would be no more unrealistic than those signed and implemented by Presidents Gorbachev and Reagan appeared in advance. Similar approaches can be taken to the general-purpose weapons of the world's militaries where US overmatch in general needs to be addressed to help manage changing priorities and for reassurance.

Elimination of nuclear weapons is the concern of the developing world, of Western NGOs and at times of leaders of the major powers. The conditions that enabled disarmament in the past have been extreme fear coupled with applied technical solutions. Existing proposals are well developed but can be accelerated in the context of broader initiatives of tracking and regulation.

The geo-strategic context will demand, and permit weapons control of the scope outlined here. If elected, a Biden Administration will inherit a mess in almost every aspect of policy. That provides a necessity and opportunity for a fresh start. For the rest of this year, the global impact of the Covid-19

tsunami will still be gathering momentum, fuelling rivalry and conflict across economies and societies. Global gun control is practical and echoes domestic concerns. But national resilience calls for much more than damage limitation.

Founding International Policy in National Resilience

A robust and resilient industrial base is needed to underpin America's role in the world. National Resilience today requires a carbon neutral rebooting of national infrastructure on an emergency basis. It can provide jobs and rescue businesses while limiting climate chaos. Strategies for a Green New Deal might draw funds from reduced national security spending. More accurately and politically effectively, a carbon neutral economy should be budgeted at similar levels and urgency as defense spending has received up until now, with the logic used to support the defence industrial base. Such a strategy might increase the top line of defense outlays in order to provide for a district by district financing to trump traditional contractors' political strategies and repeated and wildly misleading accusations of "crippling" cuts to the Pentagon budget. These activities would be budgeted under defense but organized autonomously from the Pentagon. This example of the progressive civilianization of security is in accordance with concepts of human security as first fully developed in the institutions created at the end of WW2.

The foregoing program will need to be integrated with an economic strategy to pull us out of the Covid-19-depression. With Covid-19, government intervention has once more proved vital as the private sector has imploded. Presidential checks to ameliorate Covid-19's impact could be a steppingstone towards providing a basic income for all.

National economic action is inadequate to respond to a global depression – work with the G20 and the UN will be essential. The crashes of 1929 and 2008 were followed by austerity, both of which resulted in increased

extremism. The devastation of World War Two was followed by full employment and national and international investment strategies explicitly to prevent extremism and war, at least within the West, although the benefits were unevenly distributed, and in particular did not fully benefit communities of color. Investment, including zero carbon infrastructure – not austerity – is essential to reverse the depression. Fair taxation and a balance of regulation so that it is not just owners who are protected will be also essential to social cohesion.

Resilient Values

Weapons control and economic resilience will fail or be far more difficult to achieve if they are not rooted in the core values of one humanity. Such values that can be found around the world today and historically – they are far from being a Western invention. Nor are they a form of liberal accessory to be picked up or set aside according to fashion – the risk of self-destruction makes cooperation and the values shift proposed by Morgenthau a realistic necessity. The manifesto of feminist foreign policy sets it out for a new age to combat the global threat exemplified by the rise of racist, right-wing nationalism.

Feminist Foreign Policy

[“Feminist foreign policy](#) is the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states, as well as movements and other non-state actors, in a manner that prioritizes peace, gender equality, and environmental integrity; enshrines, promotes, and protects the human rights of all; seeks to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures; and allocates significant resources, including research, to achieve that vision. Feminist foreign policy is coherent in its approach across all of its levers of influence, anchored by the exercise of those values at home and co-created with feminist activists, groups and movements, at home and abroad.” *“We need to make sure the foreign police*

apparatus looks more like us and represents the views of women in the global south,” commented Lyric Thompson, senior director of policy and advocacy, International Center for Research on Women. States as diverse as France, Mexico and Rwanda have officially endorsed their feminist foreign policies.

Enhancement of effective soft power needs to infuse the U.S. relationship with and help redefine its relationship with allies and adversaries alike. The ‘free world’ in practice applied largely to white majorities in Western nations. The worldwide response to the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movements indicates the partnership potential where the U.S. can learn even on issues such as how to organize free elections and implement just law. In the past US international policy on human rights has been concentrated on the United Nations, not on major regional partners in NATO, the Middle East and ASEAN. They need now to be integral to relations with regimes such as Hungary and Poland who care little for the freedom they were enabled to enjoy, and to the despots of Saudi Arabia.

NATO standards encompass most of the world’s militaries. From 2021 NATO standards should require democratic human rights standards. Leadership from women and people of color in allied interactions and deployments can dilute and diffuse the culture of toxic masculinity that U.S. power projection has come to represent.

Conclusion

The challenges of today may yet overwhelm us. A determination to re-plant and uproot the weeds that threaten to choke us must carry us on. And in doing so we can take heart from those who went before us, crafting and reviving the policies of the original New Deal, the UN and the civil rights movement in times more challenging than those we face today.

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