

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Solidarity, Diplomacy, and Human Rights

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A sad fact about the politics of Washington is that some of the most important issues facing the United States and the world are rarely debated in a serious manner. Nowhere is that more true than in the area of foreign policy. For many decades, there has been a “bipartisan consensus” on foreign affairs. Tragically, that consensus has almost always been wrong. Whether it has been the wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the overthrow of democratic governments throughout the world, or disastrous moves on trade, such as entering the North American Free Trade Agreement and establishing permanent normal trade relations with China, the results have often damaged the United States’ standing in the world, undermined the country’s professed values, and been disastrous for the American working class.

This pattern continues today. After spending billions of dollars to support the Israeli military, the United States, virtually alone in the world, is defending Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing extremist government, which is waging a campaign of total war and destruction

against the Palestinian people, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands—including thousands of children—and the starvation of hundreds of thousands more in the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, in fear-mongering around the threat posed by China and in the continued growth of the military industrial complex, it's easy to see that the rhetoric and decisions of leaders in both major parties are frequently guided not by respect for democracy or human rights but militarism, groupthink, and the greed and power of corporate interests. As a result, the United States is increasingly isolated not just from poorer countries in the developing world but from many of its long-standing allies in the industrialized world, as well.

Given these failures, it is long past time to fundamentally reorient American foreign policy. Doing so starts with acknowledging the failures of the post–World War II bipartisan consensus and charting a new vision that centers human rights, multilateralism, and global solidarity.

A SHAMEFUL TRACK RECORD

Dating back to the Cold War, politicians in both major parties have used fear and outright lies to entangle the United States in disastrous and unwinnable foreign military conflicts. Presidents Johnson and Nixon sent nearly three million Americans to Vietnam to prop up an anticommunist dictator in a Vietnamese civil war under the so-called domino theory—the idea that if one country fell to communism the surrounding countries would fall as well. The theory was wrong, and the war was an abject failure. Up to three million Vietnamese were killed, as were 58,000 American troops.

The destruction of Vietnam was not quite enough for Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. They expanded the war into Cambodia with an immense bombing campaign that killed hundreds of thousands more people and fueled the rise of the dictator Pol Pot, whose subsequent genocide killed up to two million Cambodians. In the end, despite suffering enormous casualties and spending huge amounts of money, the United States lost a war that never should have been fought. In the process, the country severely damaged its credibility abroad and at home.

Washington's record in the rest of the world was not much better during this era. In the name of combating communism and the Soviet Union, the U.S. government supported military coups in Iran, Guatemala, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Chile, and other countries. These interventions were often in support of authoritarian regimes that brutally repressed their own people and exacerbated corruption, violence, and poverty. Washington is still dealing with the fallout from such meddling today, confronting deep suspicion and hostility in many of these countries, which complicates U.S. foreign policy and undermines American interests.

A generation later, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, Washington repeated many of these same mistakes. President George W. Bush committed nearly two million U.S. troops and over \$8 trillion to a “global war on terror” and catastrophic wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Iraq war, much like Vietnam, was built on an outright lie. “We cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud,” Bush infamously warned. But there was no mushroom cloud and there was no smoking gun, because the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein didn't have any weapons of mass destruction. The war was opposed by many U.S. allies, and the Bush administration's unilateral, go-it-alone approach in the run-up to the war severely undermined American credibility and eroded trust in Washington around the world. Despite this, supermajorities in both chambers of Congress voted to authorize the 2003 invasion.

The Iraq war was not an aberration. In the name of the global war on terror, the United States carried out torture, illegal detention, and “extraordinary renditions,” snatching suspects around the world and holding them for long periods at the Guantánamo Bay prison in Cuba and CIA “black sites” around the world. The U.S. government implemented the Patriot Act, which resulted in mass surveillance domestically and internationally. The two decades of fighting in Afghanistan left thousands of U.S. troops dead or wounded and caused

many hundreds of thousands of Afghan civilian casualties. Today, despite all that suffering and expenditure, the Taliban is back in power.

THE WAGES OF HYPOCRISY

I wish I could say that the foreign policy establishment in Washington learned its lesson after the failures of the Cold War and the global war on terror. But, with a few notable exceptions, it has not. Despite his promise of an “America first” foreign policy, President Donald Trump increased unrestricted drone warfare around the world, committed more troops to the Middle East and Afghanistan, ramped up tensions with China and North Korea, and nearly got into a disastrous war with Iran. He showered some of the most dangerous tyrants in the world—from the United Arab Emirates to Saudi Arabia—with weapons. Although Trump’s brand of self-dealing and corruption was new, it had its roots in decades of U.S. policy that prioritized short-term, unilateral interests over long-term efforts to build a world order based on international law.

And Trump’s militarism wasn’t new at all. In the past decade alone, the United States has been involved in military operations in Afghanistan, Cameroon, Egypt, Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. The U.S. military maintains around 750 military bases in 80 countries and is increasing its presence abroad as Washington ramps up tensions with Beijing. Meanwhile, the United States is supplying Netanyahu’s Israel with billions of dollars in military funding while he annihilates Gaza.

U.S. policy on China is another illustration of failed foreign policy groupthink, which frames the U.S.-Chinese relationship as a zero-sum struggle. For many in Washington, China is the new foreign policy bogeyman—an existential threat that justifies higher and higher Pentagon budgets. There is plenty to criticize in China’s record: its theft of technology, its suppression of workers’ rights and the press, its enormous expansion of coal power, its repression of Tibet and Hong Kong, its threatening behavior toward Taiwan, and its atrocious policies toward the Uyghur people. But there will be no solution to the existential threat of

climate change without cooperation between China and the United States, the two largest carbon emitters in the world. There will also be no hope for seriously addressing the next pandemic without U.S.-Chinese cooperation. And instead of starting a trade war with China, Washington could create mutually beneficial trade agreements that benefit workers in both countries—not just multinational corporations.

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The United States can and should hold China accountable for its human rights violations. But Washington's concerns for human rights are rather selective. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy controlled by a family worth over a trillion dollars. There is not even the pretense of democracy there; citizens have no right to dissent or elect their leaders. Women are treated as second-class citizens. Gay rights are virtually nonexistent. The

immigrant population in Saudi Arabia is often forced into modern-day slavery, and recently there have been reports of mass killings of hundreds of Ethiopian migrants by Saudi forces. One of the country's few prominent dissidents, Jamal Khashoggi, left a Saudi embassy in pieces in a suitcase after he was murdered by Saudi operatives in an attack that U.S. intelligence agencies concluded was ordered by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia. Yet despite all of that, Washington continues to provide Saudi Arabia with weapons and support, as it does with Egypt, India, Israel, Pakistan, and the UAE—all countries that habitually trample on human rights.

It is not just U.S. military adventurism and hypocritical backing of tyrants that have proved counterproductive. So, too, have the international trade agreements that Washington has entered in recent decades. After ordinary Americans were told, year after year, how dangerous and terrible the communists of China and Vietnam were, and how the United States had to defeat them no matter the cost, it turns out that corporate America had a different perspective. Major U.S.-based multinationals came to love the idea of "free trade" with these authoritarian countries and embraced

the opportunity to hire impoverished workers abroad at a fraction of the wages they were paying Americans. Hence, with bipartisan support and cheerleading from the corporate world and mainstream media, Washington forged free trade agreements with China and Vietnam.

The results have been disastrous. In the roughly two decades that followed these agreements, more than 40,000 factories in the U.S. shut down, around two million workers lost their jobs, and working-class Americans experienced wage stagnation—even while corporations made billions and investors were richly rewarded. Beyond the damage done at home, these agreements also contained few standards to protect workers or the environment, leading to disastrous impacts overseas. Resentment of these trade policies among working-class Americans helped fuel Trump's initial rise and continues to benefit him today.

PEOPLE OVER PROFITS

Modern American foreign policy has not always been short-sighted and destructive. In the wake of World War II, despite the bloodiest war in history, Washington chose to learn the lessons of the punitive post-World War I agreements. Instead of humiliating defeated wartime enemies Germany and Japan, whose countries lay in ruin, the United States led a massive multibillion-dollar economic recovery program and helped convert totalitarian societies into prosperous democracies. Washington spearheaded the founding of the United Nations and the implementation of the Geneva Conventions to prevent the horrors of World War II from ever happening again and to ensure that all countries are held to the same standards on human rights. In the 1960s, President John F. Kennedy launched the Peace Corps to support education, public health, and entrepreneurship around the world, building human connections and advancing local development projects. In this century, Bush launched the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, known as PEPFAR, which has saved over 25 million lives, primarily in sub-Saharan Africa, and the President's Malaria Initiative, which has prevented more than 1.5 billion cases of malaria.

If the goal of foreign policy is to help create a peaceful and prosperous world, the foreign policy establishment needs to fundamentally rethink its assumptions. Spending trillions of dollars on endless wars and defense contracts is not going to address the existential threat of climate change or the likelihood of future pandemics. It is not going to feed hungry children, reduce hatred, educate the illiterate, or cure diseases. It is not going to help create a shared global community and diminish the likelihood of war. In this pivotal moment in human history, the United States must lead a new global movement based on human solidarity and the needs of struggling people. This movement must have the courage to take on the greed of the international oligarchy, in which a few thousand billionaires exercise enormous economic and political power.

Economic policy is foreign policy. As long as wealthy corporations and billionaires have a stranglehold on our economic and political systems, foreign policy decisions will be guided by their material interests, not those of the vast majority of the world's population. That is why the United States must address the moral and economic outrage of unprecedented income and wealth inequality, in which the richest one percent of the planet owns more wealth than the bottom 99 percent—an inequality that allows some people to own dozens of homes, private airplanes, and even entire islands, while millions of children go hungry or die of easily prevented diseases. Americans must lead the international community in eliminating the tax havens that enable billionaires and large corporations to hide trillions in wealth and avoid paying their fair share of taxes. That includes sanctioning countries that serve as tax shelters and using the United States' significant economic leverage to cut off access to the U.S. financial system. An estimated \$21 trillion to \$32 trillion in financial assets are sitting offshore in tax havens today, according to the Tax Justice Network. This wealth does nothing to benefit societies. It's not taxed and it's not even spent—it simply ensures that the rich get richer.

Washington should develop fair trade agreements that benefit workers and the poor of all countries, not just Wall Street investors. This includes

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creating strong, binding labor and environmental provisions with clear enforcement mechanisms, as well as eliminating investor protections that make it easy to outsource jobs. These agreements must be negotiated with input from workers, the American people, and the U.S. Congress—rather than just lobbyists from large multinational corporations, who currently dominate the trade negotiation process.

The United States must also cut excess military spending and demand that other countries do the same. In the midst of enormous environmental, economic, and public health challenges, the major countries of this world cannot allow huge defense contractors to make record-breaking profits as they provide the world with weapons used to destroy one another. Even without supplemental spending, the United States plans to devote around \$900 billion to the military this year, almost half of which will go to a small number of defense contractors that are already highly profitable.

Like a majority of Americans, I believe it is in the vital interest of the United States and the international community to fight off Russian President Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. But many defense contractors see the war primarily as a way to line their own pockets. The RTX Corporation, formerly Raytheon, has increased prices for its Stinger missiles sevenfold since 1991. Today, it costs the United States \$400,000 to replace each Stinger sent to Ukraine—an outrageous price increase that cannot even remotely be explained by inflation, increased costs, or advances in quality. Such greed doesn't just cost American taxpayers; it costs Ukrainian lives. When contractors pad their profits, fewer weapons reach Ukrainians on the frontlines. Congress must rein in this kind of war profiteering by more closely examining contracts, taking back payments that turn out to be excessive, and creating a tax on windfall profits.

Meanwhile, Washington should stop undermining international institutions when their actions don't align with its short-term political interests. It is far better for the countries of the world to debate and

discuss their differences than to drop bombs or engage in armed conflict. The United States must support the UN by paying its dues, engaging directly on UN reform, and supporting UN bodies such as the Human Rights Council. The United States should also finally join the International Criminal Court instead of attacking it when it delivers verdicts that Washington sees as inconvenient. President Joe Biden made the right choice in rejoining the World Health Organization. Now the United States must invest in the WHO, strengthen its ability to respond quickly to pandemics, and work with it to negotiate an international pandemic treaty that prioritizes the lives of poor and working people around the world—not Big Pharma's profits.

SOLIDARITY NOW

The benefits of making this shift in foreign policy would far outweigh the costs. More consistent U.S. support for human rights would make it more likely that bad actors face justice—and less likely that they commit human rights abuses in the first place. Increased investments in economic development and civil society would lift millions out of poverty and strengthen democratic institutions. U.S. support for fair international labor standards would raise wages for millions of American workers and billions of people around the world. Making the rich pay their taxes and cracking down on offshore capital would unlock substantial financial resources that could be put to work addressing global needs and helping restore people's faith that democracies can deliver.

Most of all, as the world's oldest and most powerful democracy, the United States must recognize that our greatest strength as a nation comes not from our wealth or our military might but from our values of freedom and democracy. The biggest challenges of our times, from climate change to global pandemics, will require cooperation, solidarity, and collective action, not militarism.