






Five Pillars of Freedom: First Steps Toward a New Democratic Foreign Policy

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FEBRUARY 2025



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INTRODUCTION

Come January 20, 2029, any Democrat who succeeds Donald Trump as president must be prepared to confront the very different and much more dangerous world Trump will almost certainly create. The Democratic Party must begin thinking seriously about a new foreign policy approach now — one based on the party’s best internationalist traditions and the defense of freedom worldwide, not fantasies of “restraint” conjured up by progressive isolationists or the timid, managerial approaches of the Obama and Biden years.

Democratic foreign policy would have required a serious refresh even had Kamala Harris prevailed in November 2024. But Trump’s return to the presidency makes matters even more urgent: Unconstrained by more experienced and sober national security voices that understand the value of America’s alliances, Trump appears ready and willing to let his deepest and most destructive foreign policy impulses run wild — as became clear during his first weeks back in office. Long-standing American allies and friends have already found themselves treated as enemies, threatened with and subjected to economic and military pressure, while adversaries and autocrats find themselves welcomed as comrades and given leave to act as they please.

Like prudent military strategists who plan for every possible contingency, Democrats need to prepare for a world more hostile to American interests and liberal values than at any point in living memory — and an America much weaker and far less able to defend them. Dictators in Moscow and Beijing will see their power and influence grow, possibly with Ukraine as a de facto Russian vassal state and Taiwan under China’s thumb. Other democracies could well follow America’s example and elect illiberal, far-right governments of their own, a task made all the easier by Trump’s gutting of USAID and the vital support it provides to those fighting for freedom and democracy abroad. NATO and other American alliances may either cease to exist altogether or stumble ahead shadows of their

former selves, effectively unable to deter conflicts or defend their members. Future American promises and commitments will lack credibility, particularly when it comes to issues of trade and security.

Indeed, in his first month in office alone, Trump bullied two NATO allies — Canada and Denmark — with threats of tariffs and territorial annexation while sitting down one-on-one with Vladimir Putin's Russia to discuss the fate of Ukraine.^{1,2} ³ He similarly promised to levy tariffs on Mexico, another neighbor and trading partner, while Secretary of State Marco Rubio falsely claimed Trump's threats wrested concessions from the Panamanian government over access to the Panama Canal.⁴ Trump also publicly backed crimes against humanity when he floated a preposterous scheme to depopulate the Gaza Strip, seize the Palestinian territory for the United States, and transform it into "the Riviera of the Middle East."⁵ The loud and repeated endorsement of gangster-style extortion, territorial conquest, and rank imperialism by the president of the United States will have lasting and calamitous global consequences.

It will, therefore, not be possible for a future Democratic president to proclaim, as President Joe Biden did, that "America is back" and restore the world as it was before. Institutions and relationships demolished, degraded, and debased by a second Trump presidency, both at home and abroad, cannot simply be resurrected as if nothing had happened over the previous four years. Reconstruction and rebuilding, not restoration and refurbishment, will be the order of the day for any future Democratic foreign policy worthy of the name — and it will need to be done at a moment when America finds itself in its most precarious strategic position since before the Second World War.

So what should a future Democratic foreign policy look like?

First, it's important to note that it's hard to predict just how much damage Trump will do to America's national security and foreign relations over the next four years — making specific policy proposals and positions less relevant than a broader intellectual and moral framework for thinking about foreign policy. Indeed, less than two weeks into his second term in office, Trump and his minions have already attempted to liquidate the U.S. Agency for International Development, purge the CIA and FBI of professional intelligence and law enforcement officers, and gut public scientific research institutions like the National Science Foundation, NASA, and NOAA.^{6,7,8,9}

What Democrats need is not a suite of detailed policy blueprints on this or that specific issue, but a general orientation and set of attitudes toward foreign policy — an animating spirit to guide them as they navigate the world moving forward.

That starts with a clear understanding of enduring global strategic realities and abiding American national interests — realities and interests that won't change no matter who happens to occupy the Oval Office.

As Democratic Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized, the dramatic scientific, technological, and industrial breakthroughs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century transformed the world in fundamental and irreversible ways.¹⁰ From steamships, the telegraph, and internal combustion engines to aviation, the radio, and rocketry, these advances made it impossible for geography to insulate the United States from threats across the Atlantic and Pacific. The political, economic, and diplomatic fate of this vast geographic expanse would now determine and define the sort of world in which America and other nations would live.

These profound changes required Americans to think about their national security in global terms, not just continental or hemispheric ones. As Roosevelt reminded his fellow citizens in his December 1940 fireside chat, "The width of those oceans is not what it was in the days of clipper ships."¹¹ Rapid technological progress since the Second World War — jet airliners, nuclear weapons, satellite telecommunications, and the internet, among other innovations — have only made Roosevelt's central argument more compelling. Today, America's own safety, prosperity, and freedom remains, as it has for more than a century, intimately and inextricably bound up with that of Europe and East Asia.

This essential national interest in the stability, security, and freedom of Europe and East Asia remains constant and objective; it can be denied and downplayed by isolationists on both left and right, but it cannot be altered, eliminated, or wished away. Now and for the foreseeable future, this interest is threatened by a pair of global gangster powers — Vladimir Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China — that aim to dominate these two vital regions and dictate their own terms to the rest of the world. In this endeavor, moreover, Moscow and Beijing receive both material and moral support from lesser gangster states like Iran and North Korea. The frontiers of America's own national security, in other words, now stand at Ukraine's Dnipro River and in the Taiwan Strait.

For a future Democratic foreign policy to fully succeed, however, the pursuit of America's national interest must proceed hand in hand with the pursuit of higher ideals and moral values that represent America at its best — namely, a stalwart defense of freedom and democratic self-government against the depredations of despots, dictators, and international gangsters.

A strong and forthright defense of freedom at home and abroad ought to sit at the heart of a

future Democratic foreign policy, serving as its crucial central pillar and main organizing principle. As America learned during the first half of the twentieth century, a world dominated by unfree powers is one that's manifestly unsafe for the United States. It ultimately remains up to America to defend freedom around the world — there is no other nation or group of nations that can assume the same mantle of moral leadership as the United States or possesses the necessary geopolitical heft. Without a power as strong and influential as America to stand for them, freedom and liberal values will find themselves with no real or effective champion on the global stage. In short, the fate of freedom around the world depends in no small part on America's own active involvement in the world.

Democrats should also make clear that they want the United States to defend freedom where it already prevails — however incomplete and fragile it may well be in certain places — against bullying, intimidation, and outright invasion by gangster powers like Russia and China. America remains the only nation with the capacity and ability to organize an effective, durable defense of democratic self-government where it now exists against such powers. It's not some abstract rules-based international order that Democrats want America to defend, then, but actual living-and-breathing societies like Ukraine and Taiwan who wish to live free from the very real threat of military bullying and political domination by their more powerful and predatory neighbors.

Four additional pillars support and flesh out in more practical terms this main animating principle of a future Democratic foreign policy:

- Provide for a strong defense capable of meeting present and future challenges.
- Alliances amplify American power and help secure American interests.

- Free and open trade with friends and allies around the world.
- A willingness to take risks and use American power to defend freedom overseas.

Let's take a closer look at each of these supporting pillars.

PROVIDE FOR A STRONG DEFENSE CAPABLE OF MEETING PRESENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

To effectively defend freedom in the world, America will need a military equal to the substantial task at hand — and Democrats will need to overcome their own allergy to defense spending. Too often, Democrats demand indiscriminate cuts to a purportedly “bloated” defense budget without even asking what they or the nation expect the U.S. military to actually do in the world. In reducing the military's ability to meet existing American commitments to defend allies in Europe and the Pacific — already stretched thin under existing budgets — calls to slash defense spending amount to an effective endorsement of a foreign policy of retrenchment and isolation.

Instead, Democrats should provide the Defense Department and other national security agencies with sufficient resources to achieve three main goals:

- Deter and defend American allies in Europe and the Pacific against aggression from the likes of Russia and China.
- Produce arms, ammunition, and equipment in sufficient quantities to supply the United States, its allies, and nations on the frontlines of freedom like Ukraine and Taiwan.
- Maintain and adequately modernize America's aging nuclear deterrent.

These three goals will require America to devote more resources to defense than it has become accustomed to in the decades since the end of the Cold War, even taking the large sums spent on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan into account. But Democrats must not shy away from providing the military with the resources it requires to meet these three core objectives.

And providing for an adequate defense will certainly prove expensive: while it's not clear how much more defense spending would be “enough,” the modest increases projected by the Pentagon itself in its most recent four-year planning document probably won't cut it.¹² The difficulties ramping up the production of missiles, rockets, and artillery shells to support the war in Ukraine also show the depth of the challenges facing America's national defense industry today. Moreover, the Pentagon's nuclear modernization plans have proven so costly that they threaten to crowd out investment in conventional weapons like fighter aircraft and warships.¹³ Trillion-dollar defense budgets may well prove necessary in the years ahead; large as that figure may seem, however, budgets on this scale would remain well below the lowest Cold War-era defense spending level of 4.5% of the nation's economy.¹⁴

Democrats should not see this more robust defense spending as an unwelcome burden that conflicts or crowds out domestic priorities. They should instead view them as a needed investment in America's own security — and an essential insurance policy for freedom around the world.

Beyond questions of funding and resources, however, the next Democratic president may well need to rebuild the Department of Defense as an institution — possibly from the bottom up. President Trump and his secretary of defense, former Fox News host Pete Hegseth, have made clear their desire to transform the military into a domestic partisan political instrument, purging

politically unreliable generals from the top ranks and scouring the military for any trace of even the mildest diversity, equity, and inclusion programs — including anodyne mentions of Black History Month. For instance, retired Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Trump and President Biden, has effectively been declared an unperson by the Hegseth Pentagon for his supposed disloyalty to Trump.

Four years of such partisan corrosion will harm the U.S. military significantly — and perhaps irreparably. In addition to providing for an adequate defense, then, Democrats need to be prepared to repair the institutional damage Trump and his national security team will do to the military itself.

ALLIANCES AMPLIFY AMERICAN POWER AND HELP SECURE AMERICAN INTERESTS

In addition to an adequate defense, America needs allies around the world — not out of a sense of altruism, but because allies amplify America's own power and help secure its essential national interests. America's allies reduce the burdens on the United States itself, whether they're deploying their own armed forces to serve alongside American troops in times of crisis or covering the costs of American troops stationed overseas. Put bluntly, the United States cannot safeguard its own national security without its long-standing allies in Europe and the Pacific.

Or as President Franklin D. Roosevelt put it in his famous Four Freedoms address in January 1941, "It is immature — and incidentally, untrue — for anybody to brag that an unprepared America, single-handed, and with one hand tied behind its back, can hold off the whole world."¹⁵

It's up to Democrats to make this case explicitly — especially given the deep enmity President Trump has already shown to NATO allies like Canada and Denmark. Indeed, it's unclear whether or not American alliances, NATO included, will exist either

formally or functionally after four years of a Trump presidency; Trump's demand that NATO members spend 5% of their gross domestic product on defense seems intended to give him an excuse to abandon the alliance. Democrats need to prepare for this possibility and start thinking about how to resuscitate these alliances or forge new ones that perform identical functions.

Patchwork solutions may emerge over the next four years to hold the line, improvisations and expedients that can also help set the strategic table for what comes next. The United Kingdom, for instance, could seek to transform the Joint Expeditionary Force — a military organization led by the U.K. and including the Baltic and Nordic states along with the Netherlands — into a more formal collective security arrangement, one that could potentially include Poland, Ukraine, and a post-Trump United States as new members. This sort of alliance could either supplement NATO, should it still exist in something resembling its current form, or provide the basis for new arrangements that will emerge if the Atlantic alliance does not survive. Similar moves, such as deeper defense ties between Japan and Australia, could be made in the Pacific as well.

Whatever happens, though, America's existing alliances in Europe and the Pacific embody the objective interests of all parties involved. It will be extraordinarily difficult to rebuild the trust Trump has already begun to destroy with America's allies, but the shared interest United States and these nations have in their alliances — whether NATO in Europe or those with Australia, Japan, and South Korea in the Pacific — will not simply evaporate over the next four years. Just as America's allies help protect their own national security, America helps its allies preserve their own national security and political independence against the depredations of larger, more powerful neighboring dictatorships in Russia and China. These concerns won't go away even if Trump blows up America's

alliances; most nations do not simply acquiesce to peremptory demands made by more powerful neighbors — as Ukraine has demonstrated with Russia and Canada is now showing Trump himself.

Democrats should build and strengthen ties with liberal political parties and forces abroad, from the center-left Labour Party in the U.K. to the center-right ruling coalition in Poland. These connections will serve two primary purposes. First, they will demonstrate to America's historical allies that at least one major American political party remains committed to freedom and collective security. Second and equally important, these contacts will provide essential feedback for Democrats as to what the United States can or should do to rebuild and repair relationships with allies wrecked by the second Trump presidency. In Europe, Democrats should focus on forging closer relationships with the Baltic and Nordic states plus Poland and Ukraine, as well as traditional partners like the United Kingdom and France, while in the Pacific they should devote their attention to the quartet of Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Perhaps most importantly, however, Democrats should argue the moral case for these alliances — and explain why the trust and cooperation of allies and friends represents a strategic asset that other nations like China and Russia lack. America has given its word to its allies for decades now, and Trump has betrayed the trust these allies placed in the United States. Canada lost 159 soldiers fighting alongside the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance, while Denmark lost 50 of its own servicemembers in these wars¹⁶ — yet Trump treats these allies as if they were enemies and threatens to take their territory. Even if Trump formally pulls America out of its alliances, Democrats should recognize that the United States still retains moral commitments to these allies that it cannot break — commitments that are the product of decades of deep cooperation and

shared sacrifice in the defense of freedom around the world.

Trump may break faith with our allies, but Democrats must ensure that America itself does not.

FREE AND OPEN TRADE WITH FRIENDS AND ALLIES AROUND THE WORLD

Nor should Democrats shy away from making a clear case for free and open trade with America's friends and allies around the world. In embarking upon a bizarre and disastrous trade war against Canada and Mexico while threatening tariffs against Denmark, President Trump appears hellbent on giving the American public a crash course in the concrete domestic economic benefits of trade. Democrats should seize the opportunity Trump's trade wars present and once again become the party of free and open trade — not treat trade policy as a political third rail or attempt to out-tariff a Republican Party now committed to protectionism.

That starts with a commitment to repair the damage done by Trump's trade wars. Democrats should pledge to repeal each and every tariff Trump imposes on America's friends and allies during his second term, starting with those foisted on America's closest neighbors. To do so, the United States could either reinstate the U.S.-Canada-Mexico Agreement — the NAFTA successor negotiated by the first Trump administration — should the Trump administration destroy it through tariffs, join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the twelve-nation trade deal that includes both Canada and Mexico as well as other allies like Australia, Japan, and the United Kingdom, or both. With China angling to become a CPTPP member, it's especially imperative that the United States sign on to the agreement — in part to ensure that Beijing does not become an irreplaceable export market and source of

investment inroads for America's long-time allies and friends.¹⁷

Future trade deals will not look identical to those of the 1990s and 2000s. New agreements will focus as much on coordination against predatory trade practices involving over-capacity, joint development of critical mineral resources, and export controls on current as well as potential adversaries as reducing tariffs, standardizing certain regulations, and expanding access to markets overseas; Latin America, for instance, possesses a wealth of critical minerals but lacks the infrastructure necessary to fully and sustainably exploit them, as does Africa and a number of states in the Pacific.¹⁸

As a matter of strategy, trade agreements should be seen and presented as defensive — attempts to shore up relationships with American friends and allies while dealing effectively with shared problems as well as opportunities to promote economic growth, create high-quality jobs and raise incomes, and encourage innovation. Tools like export controls and targeted tariffs should remain on the table to deal with specific problems such as Chinese electric vehicle overproduction, but they should be employed sparingly and in coordination with allies and friendly trading partners if and when possible.

It may prove even more difficult to restore trust in the United States when it comes to trade than alliances, however. While compelling national interests on all sides ground America's alliances and will encourage their revival in some form, trade agreements lack the same underlying strategic impulse. For many countries, China remains a live alternative as a trading partner — it is already the largest export market for many countries in South America, Africa, and the Pacific in addition to many Asian nations, especially in comparison with a United States that negotiates trade agreements

and then pulls out of them for no good reason or slaps arbitrary tariffs on its closest allies.

American credibility on this front can be enhanced if at least one of the country's two main political parties remains publicly and vocally committed to trade. Democrats ought to shed whatever protectionist impulses they retain and once more take up the cause of free and open trade with America's friends and allies around the world.

A WILLINGNESS TO TAKE RISKS AND USE AMERICAN POWER TO DEFEND FREEDOM OVERSEAS

Finally, Democrats must be willing to run risks and stand ready to use American power assertively to defend American interests — first and foremost among them, the freedom of our allies and friends overseas.

In recent years, Democratic foreign policy has been conspicuously marked by a timid, managerial mindset that seeks to finely calibrate American policy to avoid potential conflict at virtually all costs. This self-detering approach tacitly regards the United States as the only real actor on the global stage and tends to see any assertion of American power as inherently provocative, leading to passivity and an unwillingness to act even in the face of naked aggression out of a misguided and unfounded fear of escalation. Seeing America as functionally responsible for the behavior of other nations, this mindset causes American officials to negotiate with themselves and effectively cede the worldwide strategic initiative to the likes of Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran.

The Biden administration's obsession with "escalation management" in Ukraine represents only the most prominent and consequential example of this risk-averse and easily spooked mentality. Frightened by the potential for escalation and cowed by Putin's empty nuclear threats, the Biden administration engaged in

torturous internal debates about whether or not to provide Kyiv with this or that type of military hardware — only to give Ukraine the weapons it sought or lift restrictions on their use without any real adverse consequences but too late to make a decisive difference on the battlefield. It refused to offer a theory of victory or success, giving rise to speculation that the administration sought to manage the conflict to a stalemate rather than pursue a Ukrainian victory or even an outright Russian defeat.

A similar mindset could be seen on a smaller scale in the Middle East, where American retaliation against Iranian attacks on U.S. troops in the region was so exquisitely measured as to not, at least in the minds of American officials, result in a wider war. But these tit-for-tat actions failed to restore deterrence and prevent further attacks against American forces in the Middle East.

Democrats must cast off their strategic complacency and stop looking at foreign policy through a managerial lens. Even in its post-Cold War heyday of the 1990s, the United States never possessed the level of control over international affairs and global events that many political leaders, policymakers, and pundits still tend to assume it does today. To defend freedom around the world today and in the future, the United States must be prepared to use its still-considerable power to that end — even if it means running the risk of confrontation and brinkmanship with the axis of gangster powers. In other words, America must stand up for itself and the ideal of freedom in the world — in no small part because no other nation or extant coalition of nations possesses the same wherewithal to do so.

That may be difficult for many Democrats, especially after four more years of a Trump presidency that confuses bullying with real strength and braggadocio for actual influence. As after the Iraq war, they may look warily on the

use of American power overseas for any reason and renew a dalliance with the so-called “restraint” camp and various left-wing isolationists. This faction will undoubtedly insist that the United States accommodate itself to a world run on gangster principles emanating from Moscow and Beijing. But Democrats must firmly reject their defeatist counsel and ensure that on their watch, at least, America will remain the foremost — and most effective — defender of freedom in the world.

CONCLUSION

Above all else, Democrats need to orient themselves and their foreign policy to face the hostile and uncertain world to come in 2029. They must keep faith with the notion that freedom remains worth fighting for, both at home and abroad — an attitude that should and must guide any Democratic foreign policy moving forward. Policies and positions matter far less than a general foreign policy outlook that rejects isolationism, whatever its ideological flavor, and resolutely embraces both the stalwart internationalism and straightforward defense of freedom worldwide that remains the rightful heritage of the Democratic Party.

Any foreign policy that presumes the United States can retreat from a world transformed by the technological, scientific, and industrial progress of the past century and a half will inevitably run aground on the shoals of reality. Contrary to the false promises of intellectuals peddling nostrums of restraint and politicians preaching the gospel of “America First,” such a foreign policy will only result in a world increasingly perilous for both the United States itself and the prospects for freedom overseas. A strong and active America is needed in global affairs, now more than ever.

It won't be easy. Vital agencies and institutions eviscerated by the Trump administration will need to be rebuilt, refounded, or reconstituted at the same time the United States confronts a world

more hostile to freedom and its own interests than in living memory. But it must be done.

Just as it did a century ago, it once again falls to the Democratic Party to pick up and preserve the mantle of freedom – to keep the flame of liberty burning at an hour of exceptional danger, both at home and overseas. As Franklin D. Roosevelt, the greatest and most far-sighted of the Democratic Party's leaders and statesmen, proclaimed amidst the epochal domestic and international crises of his own time, "We are fighting to save a great and precious form of government for ourselves and for the world."¹⁹

Whether they like it or not, Democrats today are engaged in a similar struggle. When it comes to foreign policy, as with so much else, this generation of Democrats has a rendezvous with destiny – and like their forbears, they must make the most of it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Juul is the Director of National Security at the Progressive Policy Institute. In this role, Peter aims to craft a new foreign policy narrative that reaffirms the vital importance of active American engagement in the world and backs it up with substantive analysis of key issues relating to the defense of America's interests, values, and prosperity.

A veteran for nearly two decades of the politics and policy world in Washington, DC, Peter previously worked on foreign policy and national security at the Center for American Progress and edited a start-up online politics and policy publication. In both positions, Peter focused on the politics of national security, Middle East strategy, and defense issues as well as pursuing personal interests in aerospace policy and space exploration.

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