

HOW DEMOCRATS CAN REBUILD TRUST ON NATIONAL SECURITY: FIVE BIG IDEAS TO START

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In just about three months in office, the Trump administration has inflicted grievous damage on American national security. From threats to the sovereignty and independence of America's closest allies to launching an unprovoked global trade war and politically motivated purges of the Pentagon, Trump has left America much weaker, far lonelier in the world, and deeply insecure than at any point in living memory. And matters will only grow worse over the course of Trump's next three-plus years in office.

Democrats will need to go big and bold to even begin to repair this damage. Here are five ideas on national security that can help Democrats to do just that:

1. **A 350-ship Navy in ten years and a 250-strong bomber force as soon as possible as the core of a strong national defense.** As part of a defense budget that reaches \$1 trillion by 2029, Democrats should propose a Navy combat ship fleet that reaches 350 by the year 2035 — a larger fleet than envisaged under [current plans](#) and up from 295 ships today — and a bomber force that reaches 250 as soon as feasible. The latter goal would increase the bomber fleet from [141 today](#) and entail the purchase of 175 B-21 bombers (above the present plan for 100) alongside current plans to upgrade 75 B-52 bombers, while achieving the former would likely require annual shipbuilding budgets in the neighborhood of \$40 billion.

Democrats should also oppose the misplaced priorities of the Hegseth Pentagon, such as the secretary's heavy emphasis on waging domestic culture wars and reportedly [deep cuts](#) to the Army's force structure meant to help pay for Trump's unworkable Golden Dome missile defenses system.¹ Instead, Democrats should propose a national cruise missile defense system that protects against this far more realistic threat.

2. **Rebuild the non-defense foundations of national power.** Democrats should pledge to restore funding to America's science, technology, and engineering R&D agencies at 150% of pre-Trump levels or more. That would mean a \$37.5 billion budget for NASA, for instance, or \$10 billion for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration or

¹ Steve Benyon, "Army Planners Are Weighing Force Reductions of Up to 90,000 Active-Duty Soldiers," *Military.com*, April 3, 2025, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/04/03/army-mulling-dramatic-reduction-of-tens-of-thousands-of-troops.html>.

\$2.25 billion for the National Institute of Standards and Technology.² In addition, Democrats should make plans to resurrect the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), and other foreign aid and development assistance programs illegally dismantled by the Trump administration and techno-oligarch Elon Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency.

In addition, Democrats should pledge to look for opportunities to cooperate with allies on a wide range of scientific and humanitarian endeavors, from energy and climate change to disaster relief and space exploration to pandemic response. That will in turn require the revival and reinvigoration of USAID, the Centers for Disease Control, and other government agencies that did this work before Trump and Musk gutted them.

3. **Lift all of Trump's tariffs, recommit to free trade, and pursue strategic economic cooperation with America's allies.** Democrats should make plain that they intend to lift all of the tariffs Trump has imposed on nations around the world in both his terms in office as well as comply with America's obligations under various trade agreements, including those obligations that come with membership in the World Trade Organization. Indeed, many Democrats have already introduced measures in Congress meant to restrict presidential authority to impose tariffs—an authority that ultimately rests with Congress. Democrats could also go one step further and require Congressional approval for withdrawal from trade agreements.

But they shouldn't stop there: they should recommit free trade by signaling a clear intent to join the [Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership](#), the trade deal initially negotiated by the Obama administration that includes major American allies like Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom as well as important strategic partners like Vietnam, Chile, and Malaysia.³ In addition, Democrats should seek a free trade agreement with the Europeans. At the same time, Democrats should retain the discrete export restrictions and tariffs imposed by the Biden administration on specific Chinese industries like semiconductors and electric vehicle manufacturing.

More broadly, Democrats should propose closer defense industrial, and science cooperation with America's allies. Co-production of [missiles](#) and artillery with NATO allies offers one avenue for potential defense industrial collaboration, as does

² "Federal Science Budget Tracker," American Institute of Physics, accessed September 30, 2024, available at <https://www.aip.org/fyi/budget-tracker>; Casey Dreier, "Historical NASA Budget Data," The Planetary Society, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1NMRYCCRWXwpn3pZU57-Bb0P1Zp3yg2lTTVUzvc5GkIs/edit?gid=1363558447#gid=1363558447>.

³ Government of Canada, "CPTPP explained," last updated August 28, 2023, https://www.international.gc.ca/trade-commerce/trade-agreements-accords-commerciaux/agr-acc/cptpp-ptpgp/cptpp_explained-ptpgp_apercu.aspx?lang=eng.

shipbuilding with Japan and South Korea.⁴ Joint efforts to secure access to critical minerals could also drive a trade-and-development pact with South American nations. Finally, the United States and its allies should pursue more “big science” projects like NASA’s current Gateway lunar space station program.

4. **Double down on America’s alliances in Europe and Asia.** It’s hard to say what shape America’s long-standing alliances in Europe and Asia will be in three months from now — much less when Trump leaves office a little more than three years from now. But Democrats should make their own commitment to America’s alliances in Europe and Asia—NATO and treaties with Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines—as strong and unmistakable as possible.

That starts with rebuilding relationships with Canada and Denmark, two old American allies whose sovereignty and independence Trump has repeatedly threatened since returning to office. Even out of power, Democrats can start work on this front in the near term by reaching out to liberal and center-left parties in both countries to discuss foreign policy and national security issues. If such a dialogue accomplishes nothing other than keeping these relationships alive, it will be worth it.

It also entails substantive policy commitments, such as [permanently stationing](#) American troops in Poland and the Baltic states⁵ — an armor brigade and a combat aviation brigade in Poland, for instance, and another brigade in Estonia, Lithuania, or Latvia; such permanent bases are both cheaper than the current plans that rotate units through Eastern Europe and signal a stronger, more durable commitment to the NATO alliance. The U.S. Navy could also provide two to three ships to serve as the nucleus for an Allied Baltic fleet. In Asia, the United States should work with Japan to increase the size and strength of American forces stationed there — in part by following through on [existing Air Force plans](#) to upgrade its own forces in Japan.⁶

Democrats should reiterate their commitment to the status quo in Taiwan and their opposition to any attempt to change it by force. They should also make clear to Beijing and Moscow that a future Democratic president will not feel bound by any deals Trump

⁴ Matthew M. Burke, “First Patriot missile facility outside US starts up in Germany,” *Stars and Stripes*, December 2, 2024, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2024-12-02/construction-begins-patriot-facility-germany-16032845.html>; Timothy W. Martin, “At the World’s Largest Shipyard, U.S. Courts an Ally to Face Up to China,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/us-south-korea-shipyard-china-30aa2b11>; Commission on the National Defense Strategy, *Report of the Commission on the National Defense Strategy*, July 29, 2024, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/misc/MSA3057-4/RAND_MSA3057-4.pdf, p. 55-56.

⁵ Seth G. Jones, Seamus P. Daniels, Catrina Doxsee, Daniel Fata, and Kathleen McInnis, *Forward Defense: Strengthening U.S. Force Posture in Europe*, March 2024, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-03/240311_Jones_Forward_Defense.pdf, p. 60-65.

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, “Department of Defense Announces Modernization Plan for Tactical Aircraft Based in Japan,” July 3, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3826440/departments-of-defense-announces-modernization-plan-for-tactical-aircraft-based/>.

strikes — particularly those that harm the security and interests of American allies as well as the United States itself.

5. **Fully commit to a free, sovereign, and independent Ukraine.** Democrats should support full NATO membership for Ukraine or, as a bridge to NATO membership, a full alliance between Ukraine and a group of major NATO powers that includes the United States as well as allies like France and the United Kingdom. Whatever its ultimate shape or form, a formal American security commitment to Ukraine offers the best insurance against future aggression from Russia.

In the near term, Democrats should call on the United States and European nations to use frozen Russian assets to pay for arms and ammunition for Ukraine. Some [€210 billion](#) in frozen Russian funds remains stashed in European banks,⁷ and these funds should be used either to directly purchase weapons for Ukraine or back other financial instruments that would raise the necessary cash. They should also advocate for the removal of any and all restrictions on Ukraine's use of American weapons against Russia.

Finally, Democrats should make plain that a Democratic president will repudiate any extortionate deals Trump forces on Ukraine. That includes the critical minerals agreement currently under negotiation, which may or may not actually be concluded.

These ideas won't undo the damage to American national security done by President Trump and his administration. Indeed, it's difficult to predict just how much more harm Trump will do to the United States and its interests overseas during the rest of his time in office — or the time, energy, and resources that might be needed to mend it. America's alliances will at best be in a state of deep disrepair when Trump leaves office, for instance, making the proposals laid out here far more difficult to execute.

But clearly articulated and vigorously pursued, these ideas can lay the foundation for the rebuilding effort that will be needed moving forward.

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⁷ Marc Jones, "Explainer: How the West Uses Russia's Frozen Reserves to Help Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 5, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/how-west-uses-russias-frozen-reserves-help-ukraine-2025-03-05/>.