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Democratic Hopefuls Turn Away From Endless Wars

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For most of the past 30 years, the default American approach to global affairs has been aggressive, ambitious and disastrously wrong. George W. Bush and Dick Cheney get the blame for the war in Iraq, but it had the support of such prominent Democrats as Hillary Clinton and John Kerry. For a long time, when military intervention was proposed, the Democrats offered Americans an echo, not a choice.

That may finally be changing. The party's presidential candidates are not giving their primary attention to foreign policy and national security. But when they talk about it, they evince a refreshing skepticism about our habit of fighting wars of choice.

In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, Elizabeth Warren wrote, "It's time to seriously review the country's military commitments overseas, and that includes bringing U.S. troops home from Afghanistan and Iraq." As for nuclear proliferation (think Iran) she advocated "a reinvestment in multilateral arms control" — the opposite of Donald Trump's policy.

Bernie Sanders sounded similar themes in his recent piece in *Foreign Affairs*, warning of the risk that Trump will start a war with Iran. As a general matter, he has no use for an "aggressive unilateralism" that "privileges military tools over diplomatic ones."

Emma Ashford, a research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, praises Warren and Sanders for their consistency "in arguing for fewer interventions, spending more on diplomacy and less on the military, and ramping down the war on terror." She adds, "My impression is that the support for these ideas from some of the race's frontrunners is helping to pull other candidates in that direction too."

That appears to be the case. In Wednesday's debate, Tulsi Gabbard said we should "end these wasteful regime change wars." Tuesday, Pete Buttigieg said he would withdraw from Afghanistan in his first year, and Beto O'Rourke agreed. John Hickenlooper got no second when he insisted, "We're going to have to be in Afghanistan."

Even Joe Biden, who disavows his vote for the Iraq War, stresses that he opposed Barack Obama's troop surge in Afghanistan. In Wednesday's debate, he said a 2010 ceremony in Baghdad marking the end of U.S. combat operations was one of his proudest moments.

When it comes to foreign policy, this is no longer the party of Hillary Clinton, an inveterate hawk. As secretary of state, she pressed for escalation in Afghanistan, helped push Obama into using air power in Libya and tried in vain to get him to go to war in Syria.

During her 2016 race, she mocked Obama's droll summary of his approach. "'Don't do stupid stuff' is not an organizing principle." This year's presidential candidates seem to think that if it's not an organizing principle, then it will do until they find one.

The Democrats have sound reasons to prefer a new policy of restraint. Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya showed how badly things could go wrong even when we "won" the war. Even Obama admitted that the Libya mission "didn't work." Why would any Democrat want to undertake another war?

In the past, they acted out of a combination of idealistic zeal and fear of being tarred as soft-headed appeasers. But idealistic zeal lost its luster in Afghanistan and Iraq, and soft-headed appeasement has become the Trump brand.

Today, all Democrats have to do to look tough is to note how Trump has been duped by Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un. The candidates can reject military action against Iran or Venezuela knowing that Americans have no appetite for war with either.

Their ambitious domestic agenda would cost a lot of money, and even in an era of trillion-dollar deficits, choices have to be made. "Defense spending should be set at sustainable levels," wrote Warren, "and the money saved should be used to fund other forms of international engagement and critical domestic programs." Democrats want to stop squandering money on wars, so they can use it to expand health care coverage, combat climate change and upgrade infrastructure.

Shunning military intervention abroad has proved to be shrewd politics in one election after another. Trump promised to curtail our international role. Obama was a stalwart opponent of the Iraq War. Even Bush, in 2000, vowed to "stop extending our troops all around the world in nation-building missions."

Americans are wary of wading into trouble overseas and eager to address our problems here at home. Trump hasn't given them what they want. This time, maybe a Democrat will.