



The Gentleman From Nebraska Misfires On America's Foreign Policy Debate

Emma Ashford

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Sen. Ben Sasse's recent essay in the *Texas National Security Review* was met with some withering criticism on Twitter. Much of it depicted the article as relying far more heavily on partisan tropes, threat inflation, and generalities than on in-depth analysis or critical thinking. Perhaps it's a mistake to expect robust analysis or arguments from any politician. However, Sasse — one of the Republican Party's rising stars, a former college president, and a history PhD from Yale — should know better.

The theme of his article is America's lack of imagination in talking about foreign policy, an argument that might confuse anyone who's been paying attention to the recent and wide-ranging debates about the future of U.S. foreign policy that have happened, including in the *Texas National Security Review*. It turns out, of course, that what Sasse means when he says that "America is facing a crisis in its foreign policy imagination" is that Americans aren't actively envisioning how wonderful things would be if everyone agreed with him on foreign policy, or how terrible things would be if they didn't.

Indeed, there's a strong tension in his article between his calls for Americans to develop a foreign policy vision and his insistence that his is the only valid approach. The article shifts in the span of a few lines from asserting that "America needs a new way forward" to arguing that "U.S. policymakers can't pretend the American voters will go along with a program of vigorous engagement without being persuaded, courted, and wooed." So when Sasse says that he wants the American people "brought into a conversation about what the world might look like," he appears to view their role in this conversation as passive listeners.

Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising. It certainly fits with a worrying trend among segments of the foreign policy establishment in the era of Trump: assuming that the American people are unhappy with American foreign policy not because of its failures, but rather because it has not been adequately explained to them. Yet after almost two decades of an unwinnable "War on Terror," it's somewhat condescending to assume that the problem is with the American people, not with the foreign policy itself.

Sasse is also wrong when he states that Americans have no shared foreign policy vision. As one recent study from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Charles Koch Institute shows, despite generational and partisan differences, the American people generally support a foreign policy that sees America take a "shared" leadership role in the world, rather than a dominant one. The percentage of Americans who support an "active role" in the world is comparable to where it was at the end of the Cold War. Even millennials — the largest rising generation — clearly support an active U.S. role in the world.

Clear majorities of millennials are supportive of international diplomatic agreements like the Paris Climate Accords and the Iran nuclear deal (both of which Sasse opposed). They continue to support NATO membership. They favor free trade and believe that trade is good for consumers and the U.S. economy. So where does Sasse's contention that "so many Americans seem open to an isolationist posture to the world..." come from? It seems to rest solely on the fact that younger generations are less keen to use military force and would support a smaller military budget.

Put simply, it's not a case of no vision. Instead, it seems that the American people have a different notion of foreign policy than the good senator, one that emphasizes the non-military tools in the American foreign policy arsenal. Nor is this approach — as he repeatedly mischaracterizes it — a vision of "isolationism." Indeed, one could only consider those views to be isolationist if you ignore diplomacy and trade, and if you define global engagement in solely military terms.

More worryingly, for all his talk of vision and new ideas, the gentleman from Nebraska displays a profound tendency to — as he himself might put it — "recycle old, tired rhetoric and ideas." The piece plays strongly on classic Republican tropes of American global "leadership." He repeats the oft-debunked idea that conflict anywhere around the world poses a threat to the U.S. homeland. And despite his concern about "stale approaches" to U.S. foreign policy, his new approach sounds suspiciously like simply a continuation of the status quo: reengaging and renewing America's liberal interventionist foreign policy.

To be fair, the senator does make a few good points. His argument that American foreign policy is often incoherent is undoubtedly true. Washington does not use all the tools of foreign policy, and it rarely uses them together for greater effectiveness. His concerns about allied free-riding, and his suggestions to reform parts of America's intelligence or security agencies, do address real-world problems and offer some potential improvements.

But these are far outweighed by the mass of derivative and buzzword-centric ideas found in the essay. From rampant threat inflation to the embrace of discredited ideas like the safe-haven myth, the essay continues the pattern of recent American foreign policy: doubling down on our existing policies and hoping that they will work better this time. And instead of suggesting new ideas for how to handle a rising China, Sasse suggests a "NATO for Asia," porting a Cold-War era policy into a region and era where it seems far less likely to work.

The article's biggest logical contradictions are where it diverges into clearly partisan issues. Sasse decries isolationism but speaks about the need to secure America's "porous" borders. He praises the American-led international order, then rails against the global financial system. In many ways, the essay reflects the schizophrenia of much of the modern Republican Party on the question of foreign policy: embrace just enough Trump-style policies on trade and immigration and maintain a military-heavy approach to the world. Of course, as those polls I referenced earlier showed, this is the exact opposite of what the majority of Americans want from their foreign policy.

Despite the lack of critical thinking about foreign in this article — and among many politicians today — there is some good news. The senator is wrong when he says that "America is facing a crisis in its foreign policy imagination." In fact, if you simply look at the astounding volume of work written about the future of American foreign policy in a post-Trump era, you'll find a

lively debate with a variety of opinions, whether it's among academics, think-tankers, or in the political parties and among the 2020 political candidates.

In short, Americans are already having the foreign policy debate that Sen. Sasse wants. If he wants to shape that debate, he should consider actually engaging with it, not with a strawman characterization of it.

Emma Ashford is a Research Fellow in Defense and Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, where she focuses on U.S.-Russian relations, Middle Eastern affairs, energy politics, and U.S. grand strategy.