

# WAR ON THE ROCKS

## The Battle Inside The Political Parties For The Future Of U.S. Foreign Policy

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*“The time is long overdue for a vigorous discussion about our foreign policy, and how it needs to change in this new era.” –[Sen. Bernie Sanders](#)*

*“The United States needs a national security doctrine around which a consensus can be built — both between the Democratic and the Republican Parties and with those who share our interests and values overseas.” –[Gov. John Kasich](#)*

When the new members of the 116th Congress arrive in Washington next month, they’re likely to find themselves focusing on a relatively unusual priority: foreign policy. And though Democrats promised during the midterms to challenge President Donald Trump’s foreign policy, it’s not just about opposition to the president. With a [flurry of think pieces](#) proposing roadmaps for new [progressive](#), [liberal](#), or [conservative](#) foreign policies, everyone’s talking about [the future of U.S. foreign policy](#). The most important of [these debates](#) are the ones inside the two political parties, as Republicans and Democrats attempt to build foreign policy platforms with an eye toward the 2020 election.

Curious to understand where the right and left are heading on foreign policy, we’ve held a variety of events at the Cato Institute to try and understand this question: a roundtable building on [Patrick Porter’s work](#) on the “liberal international order,” events with notable critics of the existing foreign policy consensus, such as [Harvard’s Stephen Walt](#), meetings to explore potential areas of common ground between libertarians and progressives, and interviews with experts for [Power Problems](#), our biweekly podcast.

The results highlight not only the internal debate inside the Republican Party, but also the growing demand inside the Democratic Party for a coherent alternative both to Trump and to the existing foreign policy consensus that he helped discredit. We also found evidence of an unexpected and potentially significant turn in U.S. foreign policy: a new bipartisan consensus on the need to confront and contain China.

### ‘Hurricane Trump’

Though he’s seemingly ignorant or indifferent to many of the issues in question, Trump at least deserves credit for reinvigorating the debate over the fundamental purposes of American foreign policy. As [Peter Beinart put it](#), “in his incoherent and immoral way, he has challenged the assumption that the pursuit of unipolarity serves average Americans.”

But while Trump has upended the traditional tenets of American foreign policy; as of yet, neither party has a coherent replacement. Nor is there any going back to the way things were before. As Jake Sullivan recently told us, “Hurricane Trump has come in. He’s destroyed a lot of the infrastructure of U.S. foreign policy and of the international order, and now we can’t just build back the way we were before. We have to build back better.”

If you’re going to challenge Trump’s foreign policy, there are two options: embrace the status quo or seek a new consensus. Both sides of the aisle have a status quo wing and a revisionist wing fighting to determine their parties’ foreign policy future. These fights focus on six critical questions that will be fundamental to American foreign policy in the coming decades:

- Should the United States continue to pursue primacy, attempting to control events around the world, or should it accept that the world is becoming more multipolar and seek to do less abroad?
- Should the United States continue to rely heavily on military intervention, or should it use non-military tools of foreign policy to deal with terrorism, civil war, and other issues?
- Should the United States pursue a foreign policy aimed at spreading liberal values, such as human rights and democracy, or is such an approach contrary to the American national interest?
- Should the United States embrace multilateralism and enhance alliances and international institutions, or should it pursue a more unilateral foreign policy?
- Should the United States seek to strengthen and expand the global system of free trade, or instead pursue a nationalist and protectionist trade policy?
- Should America partner with China and accept a growing Chinese sphere of influence in Asia, or should it attempt to confront, contain, and undermine Chinese power?

Little progress has been made toward consensus on either side of the aisle, and neither party has a clear objective. That in itself is not new — since the end of the Cold War, Democratic and Republican administrations have pursued a variety of vague goals in foreign policy, from “dual containment” to counter-terrorism to human rights. Often, the only uniting factor has been a belief in America’s role as what former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright described as the “indispensable nation.” Today, however, both Republicans and Democrats are openly questioning that assumption.

### **Republicans: The President Frames the Debate**

On the Republican side, Trump has split conservatives into two camps. The status quo camp — perhaps better described as “status quo ante” — remains staunchly committed to the open internationalism and muscular American leadership of the Reagan era. Rooted in a firm belief in American exceptionalism, this approach emphasizes the defense of democracy and spread of American values.

Many of these true believers — once the guiding light of Republican foreign policy — are now on the outside. Just look at Bill Kristol, exiled to irrelevance by an increasingly Trump-dominated Republican party. Meanwhile, those still on the inside, like Sens. Marco Rubio or Lindsey Graham, continue to hold to their traditional views — for example, advocating for

a humanitarian intervention in Venezuela — but routinely coopt Trump’s language and support him in other areas in order to maintain access and influence.

Trump himself represents the second camp, promoting an illiberal, nationalist, and autarkic view of American foreign policy that dismisses long-held assumptions about alliances, free trade, and immigration. Though a few advocates have attempted to hang an intellectual framework on this viewpoint — chief among them Sen. Tom Cotton — it remains an instinctive, poorly theorized worldview.

At present, the president and his allies have the momentum in the battle to define conservative foreign policy. He may have failed to transform American foreign policy completely in his first two years in office, but there is no doubt that he has changed the terms of debate within conservative circles. Indeed, Trump’s electoral success drew our attention to the fact that many voters believe America’s traditional approach to foreign policy has not worked for them.

Whether they agree with him or not, Republican political leaders have tended to toe the line. Their failure to challenge him (at least in public) on Russia, trade, and other issues has signaled to their constituents that Trump’s views are their views. Thus, while it is too early to predict how this debate will turn out, the longer Trump serves, the likelier it is that “America First” will permanently reshape the foreign policy of the Republican Party, leaving it with little in the way of a coherent approach. As Bryan McGrath told us:

My problem is these days I don’t know what a coherent Republican foreign policy is. I know what it was: American exceptionalism was smack dab in the middle of it. A strong, active role in the world from a position of leadership... I hear the administration talking about a strong military, but to do what? It’s not like they wish to be involved in the world.

### **Democrats: In Search of a Strong Opposition**

Among Democrats, the competing camps appear less polarized, but important, longstanding differences between the two remain. The status quo camp still advocates a Clinton-style liberal internationalist position — an approach similar to the Reaganite Republican status quo in method and results, if not necessarily in motivation. This view is less prevalent among likely candidates, and far more common in the Democratic foreign policy establishment — people like Sullivan or Michele Flournoy. By putting human rights and democracy promotion on center stage, the Clinton Democrats continue to embrace America as the “indispensable nation” and its responsibility to use military force in wide range of contingencies, from regional stabilization to humanitarian intervention.

Yet the progressive wing of the party is increasingly challenging these voices. These progressive leaders are more skeptical of the use of military force and American exceptionalism more generally. Though these progressives share with Republican “America First” advocates a distaste for the excesses of primacy, they generally offer a far more coherent and internally consistent alternative to the status quo. In some cases, they have even adopted the language of ongoing grand strategic debates: In a recent speech at the Cato Institute, for example, Rep. Ro Khanna argued that “if we want to lead in the 21st century, we have to return to a foreign policy of restraint.”

Other progressives are interested in tying foreign policy more closely to domestic policy and attacking Trump-style kleptocracy at home and abroad — a campaign that undoubtedly plays

well against the backdrop of the president's numerous conflicts of interest. In a recent article, Sen. Elizabeth Warren argued that "the United States can no longer maintain the comfortable assumption that its domestic and foreign policies are separate." Bernie Sanders, her potential 2020 presidential challenger, has likewise been promoting a new focus on global corruption and kleptocracy.

But the sharpest internal conflicts concern military intervention and free trade. As Dan Nexon described, "the coalition seems divided between two depressingly familiar alternatives: liberal internationalists of the kind associated with the Democratic establishment, and anti-hegemonists, who want to see the United States drastically reduce its pretensions to global leadership." Certainly, this coalition is increasingly dubious about billions of dollars in arms sales and unreliable partners, like Saudi Arabia. Yet on the questions of intervention and free trade, there is no clear consensus.

### **A Developing Consensus**

Ultimately, it is too early to predict a winner on either side. If a new foreign policy consensus emerges, it could be radically different in its prescriptions or merely a reskinned version of the status quo — a kind of "primacy lite." A gradual evolution toward a slightly revised version of primacy is most likely in the Democratic Party, where the status quo and progressive wings enjoy at least some common ground in their fight against Trump. A more radical future seems more likely on the Republican side, thanks to Trump's increasing control of the party and its electoral fortunes.

One worrisome forecast does appear to be increasingly probable, however. The conversations at our events and on our podcast suggest that thinkers on both sides of the political spectrum appear to be narrowing in on defining the threat from China as the new master narrative of American foreign policy. Call it great power competition or a "new Cold War" — the result is the same. As Sullivan put it, "There's a striking consensus on a much darker, much harder line on China that is not just about the Trump administration... it's pretty much across the Democratic Party as well."

Given the bitterness and polarization in Washington, not to mention the depth of the Democrats' opposition to Trump himself, the emerging consensus on China — across the domains of security, human rights, and international trade — is surprising. An optimist might suggest that enduring national interests are winning out over both intraparty and interparty squabbling. An inveterate optimist might even see the seeds of a new bipartisan grand strategy rooted in containing China, fighting the spread of authoritarianism, and more nationalist trade policies.

From a more realistic perspective, however, the growing consensus on China is troubling. Having identified China as America's biggest strategic challenge, neither party has identified a clear goal. Nor have they articulated how a new approach to China would provide a foundation for a broader vision of American foreign policy. Regardless of which camp triumphs, the risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy on China — through confrontation without purpose — is real. As both parties seek a new foil against which to frame American foreign policy, they may end up instead creating the incentives for further confrontation.

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