



Socialists and Libertarians Need An Alliance Against the Establishment

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The United States needs a new foreign policy, but who is going to conceive, articulate, and implement it? In particular, could the emerging democratic socialists of the left, libertarians on the right, and realists in the center join forces to produce a foreign policy that would command support at home and perform effectively abroad? It's possible, but it won't be easy.

Over the past quarter-century, U.S. foreign policy has been in the hands of a loose alliance of liberal interventionists and hawkish neoconservatives. Both groups firmly embrace American exceptionalism, see the United States as the indispensable power that must exert active leadership all over the world, favor overwhelming military supremacy, and endorse the broad goal of spreading liberal values (democracy, human rights, rule of law, markets) to every corner of the world. They disagree somewhat about the role of international institutions (liberal interventionists see them as useful tools, neocons as potential constraints on America's freedom of action), but that's about it. Despite occasional disagreements on tactics and the usual jostling for position and status in Washington, this broad alliance has held firm across both Republican and Democratic presidents. And since 2016, it has also been working overtime to keep President Donald Trump from abandoning America's position as leader of the so-called liberal world order.

Unfortunately, the foreign policy to which these elites were committed has been a dismal failure. Their shared strategy of liberal hegemony—defined as using U.S. power to spread liberal ideals around the globe—did not produce a more harmonious and prosperous world. Instead, it helped lead to a series of failed states, deteriorating great-power relations, a global recession, declining confidence in democracy itself, and a xenophobic backlash against globalization. America's foreign-policy elites once thought the wind was at their backs and that spreading U.S. ideals would be relatively easy; today, these same ideals are under siege and the liberal world order they sought to expand is on life-support.

Not surprisingly, a number of commentators are beginning to realize that the United States needs an alternative. Writing in the *Atlantic*, the recovering liberal interventionist Peter Beinart now favors a far more restrained U.S. foreign policy, more or less identical to the one that realists have been advocating for years. Last week, the historian Daniel Bessner of the University of Washington wrote a provocative op-ed in the *New York Times* calling for the emerging democratic socialist left to get serious about foreign policy and to unite around a platform combining anti-militarism, accountability, greater congressional oversight, and threat deflation.

Which raises the obvious question: Would it be possible to assemble a sufficiently broad coalition behind such a program, one both large and cohesive enough to overcome the liberal-neocon alliance that has caused so much trouble? As noted above, the obvious candidates are anti-war progressives (i.e., the democratic socialists highlighted by Bessner); realists who favor a grand strategy of restraint or offshore balancing; and the libertarian right (e.g., Rand Paul, the Cato Institute) that has been questioning America's imperial proclivities for decades.

All three groups agree that the pursuit of liberal hegemony over the past 25 years was unnecessary, unwise, and unsuccessful. And a more restrained foreign policy is consistent with many of their individual political objectives, which could make a working coalition feasible.

For the libertarians, liberal hegemony led to a bloated national security state, threatened civil liberties, and forced policymakers either to raise taxes to pay for it or to run permanent deficits, both of which they regard as anathema. For this group, preserving liberty at home means keeping the federal government small and that objective is incompatible with trying to run the world.

For the democratic socialists on the left, liberal hegemony simply didn't deliver as promised. Trying to spread democracy at the point of a rifle barrel didn't produce stable, flourishing democracies or advance human rights; instead, it created failed states, violent insurgencies, and encouraged the United States to violate the very principles it claimed to be upholding. Excessive military spending and failed interventions squandered money that could have been spent improving the lives of Americans at home and especially the lives of Americans most in need of assistance. Globalization may have helped raise more than a billion people out of poverty in Asia, but lower- and middle-class citizens in the West saw few benefits, and the global financial order became more fragile, as we learned to our sorrow in 2008. Bessner is correct in saying that these groups lack a well-developed foreign-policy platform, but reducing America's global burdens and taking a more measured approach to globalization would fit perfectly with their broader social and political agenda.

Needless to say, most realists would welcome a more restrained U.S. foreign policy as well because they believe this would husband U.S. strength, avoid costly quagmires, encourage other states to bear a greater share of global burdens, and allow the United States to rebuild its domestic infrastructure and focus on the big strategic challenges that remain (e.g., China). So, at first glance, it's easy to imagine these three groups uniting behind a more restrained grand strategy.

A domestically driven revolution in U.S. foreign policy of the sort imagined here will also face significant obstacles, however. For starters, the hypothetical coalition I am depicting doesn't

have a deep bench of knowledgeable and experienced foreign-policy experts. Its ranks are not entirely empty, of course, but it takes a lot of people to run the U.S. government and a reform-minded president would be hard-pressed to find enough experts to staff the National Security Council with restrainers, let alone all the other positions he or she would need to fill. (It's worth noting that both former President Barack Obama and Trump faced a similar problem and ended up having to appoint a lot of people who were much more inclined to interventionism than either president was.)