



Next Generation foreign policy: Time for the Democrats to embrace restraint

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As Donald Trump ricochets from crisis to crisis, the Democratic Party has yet to present a compelling alternative to his incoherent ‘America First’ vision of foreign policy. Though a few of the more progressive 2020 candidates, including Sens. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), and Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii), are arguing for significant changes to U.S. foreign policy, many of the candidates appear to support the same tired version of liberal internationalism Hillary Clinton expounded in 2016.

To defeat Trump and put American foreign policy back on track, the Democrats should embrace a foreign policy of restraint, one that relies more on international cooperation and less on military intervention.

In a major foreign policy speech earlier this month, South Bend mayor and Democratic candidate Pete Buttigieg argued that “...we face not just another presidential election, but a transition between one era and another...I believe that the next three or four years will determine the next 30 or 40 for our country and our world.”

Not only has America’s traditional foreign policy outlived its utility, the American public is undergoing a slow-moving changing of the guard. At 37, Buttigieg is a member of the Millennial Generation and as such he represents the future, not just of the Democratic Party, but of an American public that is ready for a very different form of global engagement. Poll after poll shows that Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996, and their younger siblings in Generation Z born 1997 and onward) are ready to ditch the frequent military intervention that has dominated American foreign policy during their lifetimes and instead embrace a foreign policy of restraint.

In the time-honored tradition, older Americans have decried the Millennial Generation’s bizarre penchant for avocado toast and for “killing” industry after industry as they come of age. Inside-the-Beltway observers in particular worry about whether younger Americans are going to do the same to foreign policy. Among the trends that worry older Americans is the fact younger Americans report lower levels of belief in American exceptionalism and typically express less support for “tak[ing] an active part” in world affairs.

Just half of Millennials in a 2017 Chicago Council on Global Affairs study, for example, agreed that the United States is the “greatest country in the world,” compared to 75 percent of the Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and the Silent Generation (born between 1928 and

1945). Millennials and Generation Z are also less worried about foreign threats than their elders, including terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and the rise of China. And as a recent study by the Center for American Progress found, just 45 percent of Millennials and Generation Z agreed that the United States is stronger when it “takes a leading role in the world” compared to 59 percent of Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation.

These data points have led some to conclude that America is headed into a new era of isolationism and that there is growing support for Trump’s America First vision, or at least something like it.

A deeper investigation, however, reveals that younger Americans don’t want to retreat from the world, they just want to engage it differently. Most obviously, Millennials and Generation Z are far less supportive of using military force than their elders. In a recent poll, for example, just 44 percent of Millennials felt that maintaining superior military power should be a critical U.S. foreign policy goal, compared to 64 percent of Baby Boomers and 70 percent of the Silent Generation.

But this reluctance to reach for the sword does not reflect a more general desire to retreat from the world. In fact, younger Americans remain committed to cooperative forms of international engagement. Millennials support international agreements such as the Iran nuclear deal at the same rate as older Americans and they are the most supportive of free trade agreements like NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Millennials and Generation Z are also just as supportive of NATO and other alliances as older Americans and are actually the most likely to view globalization in a positive light.

It doesn’t take rocket science to figure out why this shift away from militarism is happening. Younger Americans have spent their formative years and early adulthood witnessing lengthy, unsuccessful wars and military intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Unlike their grandparents, they did not experience the heady aftermath of World War II when the United States enjoyed incredible economic and political dominance. Coming of age after the end of the Cold War, neither Millennials nor members of Generation Z have a real awareness of the role military strength played in the successful containment strategy of the Cold War. If they were aware, they’d have also noticed that the United States rarely used military force after the Vietnam debacle and still won the Cold War in 1991. Simply put, to young Americans, war has looked like a poor strategy. As a result, they do not share their elders’ confidence in America’s ability to use military force to pursue national interests effectively.

Today the Democratic Party is groping its way toward restraint in large part as a response to Trump and the widespread disenchantment with American operations in the Middle East. For the 2020 Democrats criticizing Trump’s pandering to autocrats, his withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and other arms control treaties, while calling for U.S. withdrawal from “endless wars” are all low-hanging fruit. Most of the 2020 Democrats can also agree on spending less money on defense to enable greater investment on domestic priorities. But while these are important correctives, they do not themselves provide a new, unifying theme to guide American foreign policy into the future.

So far, only a few of the 2020 hopefuls have talked much about foreign policy. And among the high-profile candidates only Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren have provided more fully-fleshed out visions for foreign policy. But while both of them imagine reining in costly and

counterproductive military intervention in the Middle East, a cardinal component of a restrained foreign policy, there are also clear signs to suggest that both of them continue to embrace the notion that the United States is the world's indispensable nation. As Sanders said in a speech in 2017, "As the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth, we have got to help lead the struggle to defend and expand a rules-based international order in which law, not might, makes right."

Another red flag is that both of them have recast foreign policy as an extension of domestic debates over economic and social policy. Their goal, it seems, is to beat Trump at his own game by clarifying why foreign policy matters to the average American. To win middle-class votes, both Sanders and Warren have decried unfair trade deals, kleptocracy, global inequality and the influence of multinational corporations.

Though these are important issues, they are also all potential justifications for yet more fruitless and expensive efforts to reshape the world. Just as American military power has failed – dramatically and at staggering cost – to reshape the Middle East over the past 18 years, so too would American economic and diplomatic power fail to reorganize the world to the tastes of the progressives in the Democratic Party.

In their search for a motivating principle for the future of U.S. foreign policy that dispenses with the old and rejects Trump's ad hoc approach, some candidates propose big ideas that sound nice but will likely promote more misguided U.S. activism under a new heading. Instead, they should be identifying what current U.S. responsibilities – from the ongoing forever wars in at least eight countries to longstanding treaty commitments to militarily defend more than 60 nations abroad – should be abandoned and which must be maintained for the 21st Century.

As we have seen during the Cold War and the War on Terror, an expansive definition of U.S. national security interests tempts policymakers to fall into tragic excesses. Rather than search for a new excuse for global hegemony, what we need is restraint in the face of the ever-present temptation to use force.

Warren and Sanders have taken the lead on foreign policy, while Tulsi Gabbard has focused her campaign message on staying out of unnecessary wars. But the question remains: How much momentum do their views have among the other 2020 Democratic candidates, most of whom haven't given any major speeches about foreign policy and hardly mention it on their websites.

If they're paying attention, the 2020 Democrats, will understand that their best bet is to listen to the next generation. Embracing restraint is not only a key for beating Trump in 2020, it's the formula for building a better foreign policy that will generate support from future generations.

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