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Cleaning Up Trump's Global Mess



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

The next presidential election will not likely hinge on foreign policy.

Americans will go to the polls in November to express their fervent support, or disgust, for Donald Trump. The candidates' positions on the issues — on any issues — matter only to a dwindling number of voters who have somehow managed, over the last three years, to remain undecided about the current president's fitness for higher office.

Of course, people are still responding to the pollsters when asked what they care about going into the election. Health care ranks number one in recent [Gallup](#) and [Harris](#) polls. The economy remains at the top of the [Pew surveys](#), with the environment climbing to

the number two position. National security, particularly terrorism, hovers somewhere near the top of the rankings.

But how many Americans will actually make up their minds in November based on these issues? According to The New York Times, only about 9 percent of the electorate is “truly persuadable.” Geoffrey Skelley at FiveThirtyEight arrives at a similar number — somewhere between 7 and 9 percent.

Even this number overstates the size of this sliver of the electorate. The last election was decided in the Electoral College by a relatively small number of voters in three swing states. So, the “truly persuadables” of California or Oklahoma will be indistinguishable in the blue or red wave. Only the undecided voters in places like Florida and Wisconsin will matter.

These undecided swing-state supervoters, who hold the fate of the nation in their hands, might not care about anything except, ultimately, the personality of the candidates. The issues that matter to them will likely be domestic: health care or the state of the economy. Unless Trump starts a war between now and November — which is not impossible, given his impulsiveness — foreign policy will not decide this election.

Still, it’s important to look at how the candidates consider the U.S. role in the world to understand what will happen after November. I’ve spent the last three years evaluating Trump’s erratic foreign policy: his militarism, his irrational trade policy, his war on migrants. If he gets reelected, expect four more years of nonstop aggression. It’s a terrifying prospect.

If Trump gets booted in November, he will leave behind considerable wreckage. How do the Dems propose to clean up this mess?

Status Quo Ante?

The Democrats offer such a wide range of options when it comes to foreign policy that they really represent three distinct parties. Dismayed by how far to the right the party of Trump has gone, you can back a moderate Republican in the person of Mike Bloomberg. With Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar, you can opt for a Democratic version of “the Blob,” Washington’s foreign policy consensus. Or you could veer to the left and embrace Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren.

Of course, with Trump as the reference point, all the Democrats share a family resemblance when it comes to foreign policy. They all acknowledge the threat of climate

change, want to revive U.S. diplomacy, and promise to smooth over relations with allies. Any one of them would repair some of the damage of the Trump years.

But the damage goes deeper than what Trump has wrought. So, a return to the “good old days” of the Obama years — with its expanded drone attacks, failed negotiations with North Korea, and corporate-friendly trade deals — won’t be sufficient. With that in mind, let’s look at the Democratic line-up, beginning with the man who is closest to Trump in temperament and views: Mike Bloomberg.

As a billionaire, a former Republican, and a fiscal conservative, Bloomberg is the textbook middle-of-the-road option. In some ways, President Bloomberg would not alter Trump’s foreign policy. He’s a fierce defender of Saudi Arabia, for instance, and continues to believe that its leader Mohammad bin Salman is the face of reform. Bloomberg is also a big booster of Israel and Benjamin Netanyahu in particular. Like Trump, the media mogul has a fondness for Xi Jinping and doesn’t consider him a dictator.

Despite his credentials as a fiscal conservative, Bloomberg wouldn’t cut the military budget, which reflects his innate hawkishness. And he has no problem increasing surveillance of Americans and non-Americans alike.

On the other hand, Bloomberg supports rejoining the Iran nuclear deal without preconditions. He has poured a tremendous amount of his own money into battling the fossil fuel industry and promoting clean energy alternatives. He also wants to boost, not cut, immigration rates. He wouldn’t wage costly trade wars with China or America’s allies.

In other words, Bloomberg represents what the Republican Party might have looked like if it had evolved from the Yankee conservatism of George H.W. Bush instead of going off on the ruthless trajectory of the neoconservatives in the 2000s and the neopopulists under Trump. Bloomberg offers a version of Nixonian realpolitik with a green coating. He’s the kind of telegenic authoritarian that the chattering classes criticize but ultimately tolerate.

Pete Buttigieg has positioned himself as the most cosmopolitan of the candidates, the one who has studied abroad, served in the military overseas, and speaks a smattering of languages. Like Bill Clinton, he can code-switch between small-town American boyishness and Oxbridge sophistication.

In his first major foreign policy speech in July, Buttigieg offered five pretty good proposals: rejoin the Iran deal and the Paris climate accord, repeal and replace the Authorization for Use of Military Force, block assistance to Israel if it annexes the West Bank, and invest in renewable energy. In general, Buttigieg is firmly pro-Israel, but he at least is willing to break with the AIPAC line when it comes to saying yes to everything Benjamin Netanyahu wants.

Ultimately, however, Buttigieg is a younger, hipper version of the Blob. As Michael Brenes explains in The New Republic:

On close examination, Buttigieg's foreign policy departs very little from the suburban-friendly centrism of his domestic plans. His ideas are of a piece with those of previous Democratic presidential candidates who have sought to project military strength and entrusted U.S. strategy to an inherently hawkish establishment of national security experts. Despite the salutary rhetoric, plenty of evidence suggests a Buttigieg presidency would likely extend the forever war rather than terminate it.

Amy Klobuchar falls into roughly the same category as Buttigieg, both of them trying to navigate a centrist position among the crowded field of candidates. She wants to get tough with China on economic relations and human rights, but also end the current trade war. She says she supports the Green New Deal, but also favors nuclear energy. She has supported an expansion of drone strikes but says she wants more transparency. She supports the Iran nuclear deal but calls Iran one of the two biggest threats to the United States.

In other words, she's an ace triangulator. But she's also perhaps the least experienced candidate on foreign policy, as her failure to name Mexico's president in a recent interview reveals.

The Biden Alternative

It's instructive to examine Joe Biden's current Foreign Affairs piece in light of what the more popular Buttigieg, Bloomberg, and Klobuchar are offering. Biden is an unexciting candidate in many ways, and he has suffered recent setbacks in Iowa and New Hampshire. A poor showing in South Carolina — indeed, anything except an outright victory there — will probably put the nomination beyond his grasp.

Still, Biden has presented himself as the most experienced foreign policy candidate and remains a key party insider, so his views will be influential even if he falls far back in the pack.

His Foreign Affairs essay is entitled “Why America Must Lead Again,” which suggests the usual American exceptionalism. However, Biden leads not with military strength but with defense of democracy, rolling back Trump’s egregious immigration policies, and rooting out corruption.

“Democracies — paralyzed by hyperpartisanship, hobbled by corruption, weighed down by extreme inequality — are having a harder time delivering for their people,” he writes. He pledges to pull together a Summit for Democracy in his first year focused on “fighting corruption, defending against authoritarianism, and advancing human rights in their own nations and abroad.” That’s a good idea that all the candidates should endorse.

Biden recasts trade policy as a “foreign policy for the middle class,” which translates into trade deals with labor and environmental provisions along with strong enforcement mechanisms. And he emphasizes diplomacy, not military force — ending the “forever wars,” ending U.S. involvement in the Saudi-led war in Yemen, negotiating deals with adversaries, going back to the table on climate change.

In fact, with its emphases on democracy, fair trade, and military restraint, Biden’s article is virtually indistinguishable from Elizabeth Warren’s own Foreign Affairs essay from one year earlier.

This reflects two things: a progressive shift in the mainstream of the Democratic Party and an inherited frustration with the Blob. Biden’s essay would have made a fine Nobel Prize speech instead of what Obama actually delivered, which was a measured defense of just war.

However, Biden is largely interested in restoring U.S. foreign policy to what existed prior to Trump, but with a certain naivete about the influence of the Blob. As such, it’s what Biden doesn’t say that’s perhaps more telling than what he does. For instance, he has little to say about the use of military force beyond the usual bromides about maintaining U.S. military superiority and resorting to the Pentagon only as a final option.

And that brings us to the progressive alternatives.

Moving Forward, Not Backward

Rewinding U.S. foreign policy to December 2016 would be an enormous step forward. Ending Trump’s racist immigration policies, putting the nuclear button (and all other military buttons) as far from his fingers as possible, restoring a modicum of predictability

to U.S. relations with allies, and rejoining key international agreements: that's all worth supporting.

But Trump's 2016 victory is also a reminder that the status quo is much more fragile than anyone ever expected. In office, Trump has skewered several important foreign policy certainties: that you just can't meet with someone like Kim Jong Un, that you can't walk away from a multilateral trade agreement, that you can't reassign Pentagon funds to some other mission.

Democrats would do well to remember that the Blob has a Wizard of Oz quality. It speaks with the deep voice of authority, but it has no real public legitimacy. The average American is much more willing to consider radical changes in U.S. global posture than the Blob would countenance.

So, when progressives like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren talk about significant reductions in military spending — something that Bloomberg rejects and Biden sidesteps — it's not so unfeasible as many pundits claim.

Let's start with Sanders. If you look at the [key points of his foreign policy](#), they're not that different from Biden's. His commitment to democracy and human rights even leads a centrist commentator like Jackson Diehl to give Sanders [a cautious thumb's up](#) on foreign policy (which is, in turn, a corrective to the [Washington Post article](#) claiming that Sanders would "upend America's global role").

Sanders is [not an isolationist](#). He is simply (and rightly) skeptical of U.S. military interventions. He doesn't just talk about the military as a last resort but wants to adjust U.S. spending priorities to ensure that the Pentagon no longer has a disproportionate effect on U.S. foreign policy. How much is he willing to cut? Perhaps wisely, he [hasn't talked about](#) a specific figure, preferring to focus on misplaced budget priorities:

The time is long overdue for us to take a hard look at military spending, including the "war on terror," and whether it makes sense to spend trillions more on endless wars, wars that often cause more problems than they solve. Call me a radical, but maybe before funding a new space force, we should make sure no American goes bankrupt because of a medical bill or dies because they can't afford to go to a doctor on time.

Elizabeth Warren has been more specific about Pentagon budget cuts, and that has made her a more convenient target. In her detailed health care plan, she proposed cutting \$800 billion from the military budget over 10 years. That might sound like a lot, and as a

result, Washington Post columnist Henry Olsen called her a more terrifying choice than Trump.

But a reduction of \$80 billion a year wouldn't even restore the Pentagon to Obama-era levels. In 2015, military spending was \$586 billion. By 2019, it had grown to \$716 billion, and Trump now wants to push it to \$740 billion. So, just returning to Obama-level spending, not taking into consideration the rate of inflation, would require something much closer to a \$150 billion cut, nearly twice what Warren proposes.

Neither Sanders nor Warren has offered anything truly transformational akin to a Global Green New Deal (as opposed to the domestic GND that Sanders touts), a new set of institutions to govern the global economy (a New Bretton Woods), or some fundamentally different way of engaging China and Russia. Although Warren's catchphrase has been "I have a plan for that," it hasn't applied to foreign policy. As for Sanders, his Eurocentrism has prevented him from offering anything truly global in scope.

Looking Elsewhere

Fortunately, other progressives are making bold proposals that the eventual Democratic presidential candidate can raise up. Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) recently laid out a package of seven bills that would truly restore the United States to a leadership position in the world — through ethical action rather than stirring rhetoric or (worse) military/economic hegemony.

Two of Omar's proposals are simple, imperative, and yet impossible without the Democrats winning a commanding margin in the Senate: ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (the United States is the only country that hasn't signed it) and re-signing and ratifying participation in the International Criminal Court.

A third bill, which would prohibit any security assistance to human-rights-abusing countries, is well worth considering. But it would encounter considerable resistance since the top recipients, Israel and Egypt, would face immediate scrutiny and their U.S. supporters would balk.

Three other proposals could attract bipartisan support. One would provide congressional oversight of any economic sanctions the executive branch wants to impose. A second would push the United States to take leadership on a global migration pact at the UN. A third would internationalize the YouthBuild program, which helps disadvantaged youth get the education and job training they need.

The final bill in the series, the Global Peacebuilding Act, is particularly visionary. Instead of diverting \$5 billion from the Pentagon to build the Wall, this legislation would transfer \$5 billion from the Pentagon's fund for fighting overseas wars into a multilateral Global Peacebuilding Fund. Such an elegant use of Trump's own stratagem could attract support from many Democrats and even some Republicans.

Will any of this make a difference in November?

It's likely that anyone who would spend the time and energy to parse the foreign policy differences among all the candidates has already made up their mind about Trump. Moreover, what will win the presidential election is power, not policy: power of rhetoric, but more importantly power on the ground.

And there's one more element. Particularly with his foreign policy, Trump has gradually whittled his base of support down to the nativists, those who despise "shithole" countries, who want nothing but larger walls, who want to quarantine the United States from foreign influences of all sorts. Trump's rivals, by offering a more inclusive global vision, could motivate a larger turnout among the foreign born and the larger diaspora communities.

Perhaps in this way, at least, foreign policy can play a pivotal role in the election where it counts: getting out the vote.

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