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Just a left-wing 'America First'?

Trump's Democratic challengers aren't offering any coherent and genuinely internationalist alternatives to his foreign policy

Read this article in German and Russian.

America is turning inward. In the current Democratic primaries, the US's relations to the rest of the world barely get a mention, and when they do come up, it's generally in the form of discussions about trade and tariffs on Chinese or EU imports. The days when the Cold War still cast its shadow over wide swathes of American domestic policy are long past. George W. Bush's 'War on Terror' never reached the same level – what it did do, however, was to reinforce Richard Nixon's Vietnam-era 'imperial presidency' (i.e. governing without or even against Congress), an approach Donald Trump is now energetically pursuing with an isolationist agenda.

Trump's unilateral threat of war against Iran, for instance, made a mockery of the US constitution; his freewheeling medley of confrontation and cooperation with autocrats worldwide, not least with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-um, takes place in blatant contravention of the division of powers at home. Japan, South Korea, and above all the Ukraine: there is now no partner of the Western Alliance left who Trump has not offended.

At the same time, he has left Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan a free hand in the Middle East – that region of the world in which, since 1945, American foreign policy has always taken a particular interest and in which Trump has had no success in pacifying the never-ending Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. Then there is the 'peace plan' for the Middle East which is so one-sided that doesn't live up to its name. And, finally, there are Trump's reactionary environmental policies. All of this left the world edging closer to escalating global conflict and potentially even nuclear war than at any time in recent memory.

The Democrats also lack a clear foreign policy vision

Not that Donald Trump seems at all concerned that he may go down in the history books with this miserable state of affairs. His foreign and security policies remain defined by his erratic logic and his repertoire straight out of the playbook of a distinctly mediocre broker: threats, displays of force and flattery are all thrown into the fray to secure fragile deals that are then sold by his loyalist devotees as strokes of genius.

The reality, though, is that Trump has trashed the Trans-Pacific Partnership and weakened the World Trade Organisation – which remains the most important forum for resolving global trade disputes and from which the US have benefited enormously. Yet for all the well-informed front-page criticism by liberal media outlets such as *The New York Times*, readers barely glance at the disastrous foreign policy as they flick through to read about domestic issues.

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Yet the Democrats have also neglected to field a genuine foreign policy expert with a clear view of how international relations and transnational issues will develop in the near future. This led the former president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Jessica T. Matthews, to ask pointedly: 'Do the Democrats have a foreign policy?' Having previously served in the State Department and the White House, Matthews has listened to 2020's Democratic candidates and considers the widespread pledges to clear up after Trump and get back to a multilateral approach little more than 'lip-service'.

Four questions that mark left-wing foreign policy

After all, can there actually be a return to the *status quo ante*? Even if Trump is not elected for a second term, his administration – combined with global trends in the early 21st century – have change the world so radically that there can be no 'clearing up'. No amount of policy back-pedalling and no number of statements in favour of renewed multilateralism will be able to change the fact that radically new geopolitical constellations have formed.

But the Democratic contenders themselves don't present many new ideas. With his global left-wing populism, Bernie Sanders is a peacenik as anachronistic as Britain's Jeremy Corbyn; Elizabeth Warren meanwhile, for all she is right to chastise US monopolists, is prone to view everything – including foreign policy – through this prism; and Joe Biden has nothing more to offer than re-heated initiatives from his time as Obama's vice-president. There are two questions the Democrats have, as America's opposition, yet to answer: which concepts do you have for which problems? And what should the normative basis for left-wing foreign policy actually be?

On this last point, political philosopher Michael Walzer defined four core questions in a piece for *Dissent*, a magazine he himself edited for many years. Firstly: who are our allies abroad and how can we support them? How do we address global inequality? When should we support the use of force – and when should we oppose it? How does the primarily secular left approach the worldwide renaissance of religion? Walzer is incisive as he lays bare the left's standard position when faced with these issues: it concentrates on improving its own domestic society and fails to intervene against oppression beyond its own borders.

The question of internationalism

In other words, the left's current approach is internationalist in principle and isolationist in practice: it's 'America First' from the left – and it means fighting violence against innocent people at home while allowing it to continue elsewhere. Walzer calls this attempt to have a principled foreign policy actually implementing it 'leftist inwardness' and has long criticised it, going back to his prior analysis of 'just wars'. It's an issue by no means unfamiliar to European readers who remember the time from 1990 onwards when pacifists and interventionists (both Walzer and the author of this article are considered to be the latter) argued about UN peacekeepers and Western military forces in the Gulf War, in Bosnia and Kosovo, and in Iraq.

Walzer goes through the various fallacies on which left-wing pacifists have historically predicated their positions: that, whether they do right or wrong, oppressed peoples (e.g. Algerians, Cubans, Nicaraguans) must never be criticised in their fights for freedom; that US policy is always *per se* imperialist; that Israel is a US lackey. It was on these premises that Sartre mistakenly argued against Camus, that Foucault fell for Ayatollah Khomeini, and that Judith Butler got it wrong with BDS.

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conventions of speech and threats of academic boycott that fail to do justice to the complexity of global conflicts; he also describes in detail how difficult it would be to implement humanitarian interventions, even when they are justified, as long as there aren't any institutions capable of regulating global affairs beyond the narrow purview of nation-states and their considerations.

As hard as it is to disagree with Walzer's analysis, it seems strange that, in a book he published in 2018, challenges of the first order such as climate change and mass extinction, cyber-security and sustainable growth are hardly mentioned at all. It is, after all, these problems of planetary magnitude that Trump and his consorts flatly deny or ignore cynically – and thus precisely the issues which a Democratic alternative should tackle; only by doing so can they get beyond the parameters defined by the Cold War and nation-state-level interests.

What will Europe do if Trump gets re-elected?

Yet advice produced by foreign-policy think tanks has had precious little impact on the Democratic candidate field, leaving only the barest outline of an alternative to Trump's foreign policy. This may yet prove to be a fatal flaw inasmuch as foreign policy could still become a decisive issue in the later stages of the presidential campaign. Simply following Barack Obama down the left-wing 'America First' road will not be enough to offer a deeply unsettled nation hope and confidence in the future. The Democrats have to offer a path out of the current schizophrenic dichotomy of Trump's braggadocio on the one hand and almost daily whisperings of the decline of a former superpower on the other.

In view of the current situation, all the disingenuous talk of 'bringing the troops back home' from the Middle East will be very hard to act on; this, in turn, makes promises to start really reining in the US's out-of-control defence spending look hard to believe. Whether Congress is able to regain its constitutional control of foreign and security policy will depend to a great extent on whether the parliamentary arithmetic of the Senate changes – and there is currently little reason to suspect it will.

In their debates, the Democratic primary candidates are visibly pained when foreign policy comes up and prefer to leave it to left-wing Christian mayor of South Bend/Indiana, Pete Buttigieg, and billionaire

philanthropist Tom Steyer to at least mention the climate issue or give their packages a little trade-policy spin. After all, the Green New Deal a Democrat-led US would enact to repair the country's crumbling infrastructure will only work if climate protection and biodiversity are also the leading principles of international trade and global investment.

What's more, an environmentally enlightened transnational political agenda would have to include civil society and work with supranational and domestic networks of regions and cities who willingly and independently agree to respect the Paris Climate Accord and pursue the United Nations' sustainable development goals regardless of national policy.

It would feel easier to criticise the lack of US leadership and impetus if the European Union were able to bring itself to take more decisive joint action on these issues. And those who – despite all that has already happened – almost desperately cling to the idea of transatlantic cooperation will have to accept that, if Donald Trump is re-elected, this will not work – Trump has publicly declared that he sees Europe as his main rival. In this context, it's quite astounding that Europeans have hardly spoken to the Democrats or to the institutions of US civil society about the world after 2020.



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