

Trump's Democratic Critics Are in Danger of Following His Lead

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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They need to do more than reject his foreign policy rhetoric—they need to break with its substance.

President Donald Trump is a unilateralist. He often seems more comfortable condemning allies than adversaries. He prefers to go his own way, walking away from multinational agreements or understandings with relish—witness the Paris Climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal. He makes it clear that he wants out of the Middle East—a region that, he believes, has consumed far too much American blood and treasure.

Democrats have rushed to attack the president for these stances. But although they might critique his rejection of multilateralism, in many cases, their view of the Middle East is not that different from his. They, too, want to withdraw from the world and reduce our responsibilities. They might respect the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian nuclear program, but they show little willingness to assume obligations and responsibilities in the Middle East or internationally. There is a danger that many of Trump's Democratic challengers might reject the imagery of his foreign policy, but not necessarily some of its practical implications.

There is an alternative vision for Democrats that does not require the United States to be the world's policeman, although it would still require the U.S. to play an active role on the world stage, fulfilling its responsibilities toward those who would partner with us against persistent threats. It would, in other words, be very different from Trump's go-it-alone instincts or from those Democrats who favor retrenchment. If Trump's opponents want to do more than defeat him at home—if they wish to restore America's standing and security abroad—they will have to embrace the four principles of this vision, and explain to voters why Trump is as wrong on the substance of his foreign policy as he is on its style.

Trump pegs his foreign policy to the principle of state sovereignty: Every nation has the right to define its own future, free from outside interference. His first speech to the United Nations General Assembly, in September 2017, spelled

this out. It's natural for each nation to pursue its own interests, he argued then. The inevitable competition won't produce conflicts, because that would serve no one's interest.

Regrettably, it is a theory at odds with both history and current realities. Clearly, some nations seek control over others, and they don't always play fair. Consider China, which is building extensive military infrastructure in the South China Sea, while denying the claims of other countries. More generally, China's leaders believe its size, economic heft, and long history as a civilization should give it broad sway internationally. The Islamic Republic of Iran believes it should be the dominant power in the Middle East, using instruments such as the Qods Force and Shia militias to extend its influence and threaten those who oppose its aims. Russia, under Putin, seeks to restore its status as a global superpower—and claims extensive spheres of influence.

It matters little that all these nations are acting, in part, with the defensive aim of pushing threats farther away from their homelands. In a world in which there are no rules, those who believe they have the right to dominate others will do so, and nations will act to defend themselves at others' expense. Boundaries will be defined by power, not principle.

In the past, political leaders of both parties have understood that. When diplomatic pressure, including onerous international sanctions, did not force Saddam Hussein to withdraw after seizing Kuwait in 1990–91, President George H. W. Bush used military intervention to force Iraq out of Kuwait. Bush acted because he believed that if we did not establish clear-cut rules against aggression, the law of the jungle would define the post-Cold War epoch.

His intervention worked. Unfortunately, interventions in the Middle East since that time have proved very costly, without making the region either safer or more stable. Trump might exaggerate the actual costs of these interventions, claiming we spent \$7 trillion, but there is no escaping the high cost and low return from our use of force in Iraq and Afghanistan. What's more, the terrible humanitarian consequences of the wars in Syria and Yemen, which reflect regional rivalries and have a largely tribal and sectarian character, are reminders of the atavistic nature of conflicts in the Middle East.

President Barack Obama's view of the area might have been more informed than Trump's, but it was not dramatically different. He sought to pivot to Asia, where he saw growth and dynamism, to escape being mired in the Middle East's conflicts. Trump's planned withdrawal from Syria reflects his desire to be not just out of Syria and the Middle East—but out of playing the world's policeman role.

“This is not about a return to isolationism,” said Steve Bannon, the president's former chief strategist. “It's a pivot away from the humanitarian expeditionary mentality of internationalists.” There has always been a natural tendency in America to retrench after foreign interventions that prove costly—that was certainly true after the First World War and Vietnam. So with U.S. forces still deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, a decade and a half after they entered, it is not surprising that there is an impulse to pull back.

The American public is understandably wary and weary of military interventions. Trump gets this. Democrats vying with Trump in 2020 will not be enthusiastic about foreign interventions, especially in the Middle East. But it is important that they not simply adopt his policy with a friendlier tone or with a different style. He eschews alliances, and they won't necessarily do so. But Trump is not wrong that alliances require commitments from us, and they can be expensive to fulfill. He wants none of that. Democratic challengers to Trump will need to recognize that we won't have partners if we expect them to expose themselves to risks without being able to count on us for support—economic aid, intelligence cooperation, security assistance, and, if need be, the limited deployment of forces.

The recent past illustrates the folly of putting large American forces on the ground in the Middle East. It is almost certain to produce a backlash and compound the problems it seeks to solve. However, U.S. support—which included provision of arms and air strikes—for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces was very effective in rolling back

ISIS. Earlier, in Iraq, after the U.S. fought the war in all the wrong ways, it was the backing of the Awakening Councils with arms, intelligence, and salaries that defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq and allowed the central Iraqi government to gain greater control.

ISIS and al-Qaeda in Iraq were never content to stay in the Middle East. They defined our existence as a threat, and were always determined to carry out acts of terror against us. They filled the vacuums that we helped to create by our intervention in Iraq and then our policy of avoidance in Syria.

Going it alone—whether Trump style or with a kinder, gentler tone—is not going to make the world a safer place. It will also not necessarily prove to be cheap. Retrenchment might seem satisfying until much greater threats emerge in response to American passivity—and they will emerge if the U.S. seems less likely to respond. That, too, is a lesson of history. But there is an alternative that does not require us to carry the sole burden of ensuring broader stability internationally or regionally. And, that alternative is one that Democrats could adopt. It would be guided by four principles:

First, America must prevent vacuums from forming. Vacuums invite the worst forces to fill them; sooner or later, those forces will pose a threat to us. It's far less costly to prevent the formation of vacuums than to face the threats later, when our options are fewer and the price of acting is higher.

Again, take ISIS as an example. It emerged in the vacuums that were created in Iraq and Syria. The former we produced by removing Saddam Hussein, with only a misguided plan for the day after. We contributed to the formation of the latter by doing so little in response to the uprising against Bashar al-Assad. The great irony is that the Obama administration adopted a policy of providing meaningful military support to local partners who had a stake in fighting ISIS—but only after ISIS had already emerged and controlled vast territories in Syria and Iraq. Hesitancy to be drawn into Syria led the administration to do far too little, too late. The belief that Syria would become a second Iraq led to a reluctance to identify and support serious local actors at a time when it might have made a difference. The fundamental lesson here is to identify credible local partners who have their own stake in preventing vacuums, who can succeed with our help, and whose potential for decent governance can also offer the prospect of genuine stability.

Second, the U.S. must cultivate allies and partners. We can't carry the burden of trying to counter all threats or preempting vacuums or diplomatically settling conflicts or helping reconstruct post-conflict areas by ourselves. We need allies. Oftentimes, our European allies know particular regions and the players better than we do. And, of course, local partners are essential: They know the political, social, and psychic terrain better than we do and are ready to defend themselves. Still, the key to successful partnerships will be defining genuinely shared interests, and working with partners who demonstrate their credibility.

Third, there is no substitute for hard power. Predatory or revisionist powers—Russia, China, Iran—must know not to test us, even as we must be clear on where our vital interests lie. Private, not just public, communication with them is the key to ensuring there is no misunderstanding. Blunt private messages make sense because they don't force others into a position where they must respond—public threats usually provoke comparable responses, and while sometimes necessary for deterrence, they can tie our hands or those of nations we are trying to influence. Still, threats or tough messages in private are more likely to be convincing if we are perceived to have the capability and the will to act on them.

We want the Russians and Chinese (and even the Iranians) to understand we are willing to cooperate on issues where we have mutual interests and we will not needlessly provoke them. At the same time, we need to make clear that when they engage in unacceptable behavior, the costs will be high. That message is always more persuasive when we are not acting alone but have others who will join us in imposing costs.

Fourth, soft power and values matter. The attractiveness of the U.S.— what it is and represents—has been a source of our soft power. It is our soft power that traditionally has made it easier for others to accept our objectives and join coalitions we organize—this is especially true for our democratic allies. Because values and a rules-based order matter, we also cannot be indifferent to genocide. Bannon might rule out humanitarian interventions, but humanity itself demands, and global order requires, that we never accept the claim that state sovereignty permits leaders to do whatever they want to their citizens. That is why “Never Again” and “Responsibility to Protect” must not be empty slogans.

Trump might speak of “America First,” but he is making us “America Alone.” The proliferation of deadly weapons, terror, climate change, migration, pandemics, and illegal drugs can only be dealt with effectively using broad coalitions. Standing alone does not make us safer. Trump’s Democratic Party challengers (and Republican critics) would be wise to reject not just the manner in which Trump delivers his message, but the logic that undergirds it.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Atlantic website (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/01/trump-and-democrats-share-foreign-policy-views/580549/>). ❖

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