

Introduction and summary

Regardless of who wins the November 2020 presidential election, the president will be sworn in during an unprecedented set of national crises—most urgently, a pandemic that has had a profound effect on the daily lives of all Americans and has left more than 215,000 dead. With the nation still grappling with the educational, social, and public health consequences of the coronavirus, the next administration will take office during the worst economy since the Great Depression. The next administration will also have to lead a nation badly divided—one with little faith that government can be held accountable or effectively address issues such as structural racism and economic inequality.

Meanwhile, the president who takes office in 2021 will lead a country diminished in the eyes of the world. While the Trump administration was embracing nationalist, authoritarian politics and badly mishandling the pandemic, the world moved on without us, and “America first” increasingly meant “America alone.” At precisely the moment when the United States needed to be working alongside its allies and partners to solve global challenges such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and rising authoritarianism, the Trump administration retreated from advancing U.S. interests and defending our values to instead hiding behind fake walls and empty bravado. The next administration and its national security team face the immense challenge of reversing this dynamic and reviving the United States’ sense of purpose in the world.

Yet January 20, 2021, will also bring tremendous potential for positive change. This potential lies not in America’s past but in its present. The extraordinary mobilization against structural racism and injustice that followed the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis has shown the world that there is a United States still worth identifying with. The next administration has the opportunity to demonstrate that democracies are the most responsive to the needs and aspirations of everyday citizens. And it should seize that opportunity to promote a democratic renewal at home and abroad.

If a new administration takes office in January, Americans’ hopes for a new and better day will be high, and the world will be watching for early signs of what the next four years will bring. Behind the scenes, the president-elect’s transition team will have been preparing for months to transition from campaigning to governing—

recruiting and vetting top personnel, reviewing a daunting inbox, and deciding how to implement the president-elect's policy priorities across the federal government. And if President Donald Trump is beginning a second term, all eyes will be looking to see whether and how his governing style changes as the incumbent who is no longer constrained by reelection concerns.

In January 2020, the Center for American Progress set out to consider what a progressive national security agenda could look like in either scenario. CAP convened experts from across the national security policy, legislative, and advocacy community to examine the top policy challenges and opportunities that a new national security team will likely confront and to consider concrete ways to advance progressive ideas in the first 100 days of a new administration. As this group considered what would be necessary to advance such a progressive national security vision, it became clear how much rebuilding of U.S. capacity and international credibility would need to happen as a prerequisite to progress. Because, regardless of who wins in 2020, the president and his national security team will have to govern during an ongoing pandemic, with hollowed-out institutions, strained global alliances, a worsening climate crisis, and a much more competitive world. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed that national security is about far more than just defending against traditional security threats or negotiating diplomatic agreements. It is also about safeguarding Americans and their way of life. The COVID-19 crisis has also shown that principled U.S. leadership at home and abroad still matters, that international cooperation is essential, and that without that leadership, the world struggles to galvanize collective action, with awful results.

Yet even before the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. foreign policy and national security badly needed to reorient itself to better address the challenges of this century, correct a grievous imbalance of priorities, end the wars that have spanned two decades, and connect more directly to what the American people actually want. The next administration will face an important opportunity to reorient U.S. foreign policy to meet this moment. In doing so, it will need to put democratic values at the center of its foreign policy and prioritize working with our democratic allies and partners to tackle the world's most urgent challenges—whether it is rising authoritarianism and democratic back-sliding, rapid technological change, or the complex economic and security challenges posed by China. Given the growing competition between democratic and authoritarian systems and its direct impact on the global order, intensive action will also be needed to strengthen the foundations of our collective democracies so that we can more effectively shape the direction of that order. In the past,

the United States has risen to these moments by renewing its approach at home and abroad—and it can do so again. With this vision in mind, the past few years have clarified some important shared ideas across the progressive community, including the need for a return to American diplomacy and less militarization of our foreign policy; the strategic importance of living our values at home and abroad; the importance of the fight to defend the democratic world; the urgency of restoring faith in our national security institutions; and the need to focus on the challenges facing the next generation, not the past.

Over the past several months, the CAP National Security and International Policy team worked to develop an actionable plan that could serve as a roadmap for the early days of a willing administration—the first executive actions, human capital and budget investments, and policy initiatives. When considering how to scope this plan, we identified five key pillars of action that not only reflect the reality of the world that the next administration will confront but also the progressive values that are necessary to put the United States on a more principled and sustainable path internationally:

1. Rebuilding and modernizing our national security institutions to provide the tools and resources necessary to meet today’s national security challenges.
2. Living our democratic values at home and abroad and prioritizing the defense of those values.
3. Ending the current wars responsibly and leading with diplomacy—not military action—to resolve conflicts.
4. Recalibrating our global relationships, including with U.S. allies, competitors, and adversaries.
5. Tackling global challenges such as climate change, migration, arms control, corruption, and the need to build a new multilateralism that advances the collective good.

The next president and his national security team will need to prioritize among these pillars and align them with his domestic policy priorities. As CAP built this 100-day plan, we were mindful that the line between domestic and foreign policy is no longer as stark as it once was. Challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and competing effectively with China will require substantial domestic action. This plan touches on what necessary steps the United States must take at home to put it on stronger footing in the world, including investing in its economic competitiveness, strengthening its democracy, and taking bold steps on climate change. CAP will continue to deliver additional bold, progressive ideas in these areas in the months ahead.

This plan is by no means exhaustive. It will, of course, take more than 100 days to end wars, reinvent institutions, tackle global challenges, reset relationships, and bolster democracy. This plan is designed to be a starting point and a constructive contribution of concrete and actionable ideas, not a rigid prescription. CAP does believe, however, that these ideas go a long way toward reorienting U.S. foreign policy and national security toward a more progressive path.

The past four years, and many before, have demonstrated that the United States needs to take a different approach to the world to better advance our interests and defend our way of life—an approach that prioritizes democratic values, delivers real results for the American people, and tackles big, global challenges head-on. There will be a natural impulse to take an incremental approach during these unprecedented times, but this is precisely the moment to take bold, necessary action. CAP hopes that this plan will contribute to a meaningful shift.