

# THE SOURCES OF SOCIALIST CONDUCT

WHAT U.S. FOREIGN  
POLICY WOULD LOOK  
LIKE IF SOCIALISTS  
RAN WASHINGTON.

BY THOMAS MEANEY



**JUST A FEW YEARS AGO**, the idea of a social democratic foreign policy—much less a democratic socialist one—in the United States would have seemed a quixotic proposition. No U.S. administration has even pretended to have one. Franklin D. Roosevelt's foreign policy had no coherent ideological agenda. Jimmy Carter's brief administration broke with postwar U.S. foreign policy, but it did so under the banner of human rights, not social democracy.

The political configurations now emerging in the West have dramatically reversed the recent status quo. The old consensus-oriented social democratic parties in France and Germany today lie in ruins, having paid dearly for the privilege of selling themselves out. In stark contrast, the United Kingdom, the heartland of market capitalism and monetary discipline, is now home to one of the most significant mass leftist political movements in the world, however griffin its

electoral future. Portugal, once a political backwater in the European Union, shows that alternatives to austerity are as practicable as they are popular. And across the Atlantic, the idea of a democratic socialist president winning the White House is no longer the stuff of fantasy.

Such is the leftist momentum in the United States that it is once again necessary to distinguish between social democracy and democratic socialism. The first is fundamentally reformist and aims to blunt the harder edges of capitalism and make it sustainable. The second is transformative and aims to replace the capitalist system with a socialist order. Now that both these agendas have shot to prominence in U.S. politics, each with their own protagonist (Elizabeth Warren for social democracy, Bernie Sanders for democratic socialism), it's imperative to think through how the power of the United States could be used—and changed—by these ideological formations. For the sake of convenience, the whole spectrum running from social democracy to democratic socialism will be referred to below as "left," though it is important to

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avoid collapsing all of the differences between the two visions. Considering the forces arrayed against it—a diplomatic corps still rooted in Cold War visions of order, corporate interests that are largely determined to resist any leftward drift in Washington, and the left's own talent for schism—any left U.S. foreign policy would likely unfold in a piecemeal fashion. But any program worthy of the name would have to be explicit about its goals. It would have to fundamentally revise the position of U.S. power in the world, from one of presumed and desired primacy to one of concerted cooperation with allies on behalf of working people across the planet.

Since the early 1940s, U.S. foreign policy has been largely premised on saving the world for capitalism—whether that has meant setting up international monetary institutions, enforcing a property-protecting legal order, keeping capital-threatening insurgencies at bay, or protecting the economies of allies to allow them to develop. Today's left foreign-policy thinkers argue that the time has come for U.S. power to serve a different purpose: At a bare minimum, it should protect the world from the excesses of capitalism and counteract the violent implications that U.S. policies and interventions around the world have all too often oxygenated. If not ignited. The first steps of any left foreign-policy program would be to democratize U.S. foreign policy, reduce the size of the U.S. military footprint, discipline and nationalize the defense industry, and use U.S. economic power to achieve egalitarian and environmental ends.

The tradition of social democracy in particular is haunted by its own ideals. Its triumphs have been mostly domestic: mass voter enfranchisement, the defeat of official racial discrimination, the provision of basic welfare and other rights. The movement got its start in the 19th century, together with the emergence of nation-states, when owners of corporations and factories were forced into making at least some compromises with workers. The question of how to extend social democratic principles beyond the nation has long been a vexed one. The metaphors under the heading of "foreign policy" are not the prettiest pages in the movement's album: German Social Democrats backing the Kaiser in World War I; French Socialists insisting on holding the course in Algeria; Brazil's Workers' Party government sending armed forces to lead a peacekeeping mission in support of an authoritarian Haitian government in 2004 in a vain attempt to win a Brazilian seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Nevertheless, social democracy's basic principles—the idea of a large organization of working people, not a vanguard, aspiring to better social and economic conditions—retain their force. It is often forgotten, even by social democrats themselves, that the fight is not fanatically attached to the idea of social equality but rather to the idea that genuine freedom requires certain social and economic preconditions. Social democracy starts with people using the instruments of a democratically controlled state to loosen

the grip of liberal capitalist dogma. The question for a left foreign policy is how to harness anti-elite sentiment around the world for the cause of environmental renewal, economic and social equality, and mutual political liberation.

## 2

**THE FIRST GOAL OF A LEFT FOREIGN POLICY** would focus on changing how foreign policy is forged in the first place. The priority would be to give democratic control over the basic direction of foreign policy back to the electorate. It is imperative that state power not be delegated to a cloistered elite, whether a Leninist vanguard or, as in the U.S. case, a liberal technocratic elite that has long conflated the interests of the nation with those of global capital. The U.S. foreign-policy elite has barely questioned its commitment to free trade pacts and permanent military missions abroad. That's why a left foreign policy would need to begin by returning war-making powers to Congress (even if that involves cajolining Congress to reassume them) and rescinding the Authorization for Use of Military Force, which, since 2001, has functioned as the legal writ for wars across three administrations.

This restoration of public accountability would have the additional advantage of furthering substantive democratic goals. The U.S. electorate overwhelmingly opposes aggressive foreign wars and interventions, unmoved by the appeals to credibility that foreign-policy elites have used to guide the United States into one quagmire after another. Donald Trump won the presidency in part by acknowledging this fact. No one doubts that the United States' current global posture is the contingent result of its extremely free hand in world affairs in the 1940s and 1950s. The maintenance of U.S. troops in Germany, Japan, and South Korea today baffles a generation that did not live through the Cold War. Recent polls suggest that 42 percent of Germans want U.S. forces to leave the country and 37 percent want them to stay, while in Japan protests and referendums have repeatedly confirmed the public's desire for a reduction of the U.S. presence. The problem with the existing foreign-policy culture's prioritizing of military solutions is that it cuts off more effective policy options and stunts the diplomatic corps' ability to pursue them. Long-term consequences on the ground have been all afterthought in recent calls—from liberals and conservatives alike—to intervene in Syria, Iraq, Iran, and

Venezuela. No matter that Washington's postwar use of force has an extremely poor record on this score. In the case of Syria, the constant airing of a military solution precluded political bargaining that could have reduced violence at a much earlier stage. A left foreign policy would mean ending the way the foreign-policy establishment and the media routinely conflate "the United States doing something" with "military intervention."

There is no ironclad rule that says a left foreign policy must reduce the size of the U.S. military footprint. One could imagine a scenario in which U.S. forces went to war to protect the global environment from climate chauvinists, slave states, or other enemies of a social democratic global order. But a genuinely left foreign policy would be a failure if it did not focus on the vast extent of U.S. economic power, which is constantly at work in the background of international politics. Social democrats would properly seek to place economic power at the center of foreign policy.

That's why a priority of a left foreign policy would be to revolutionize military industrial policy. Compriising well over half of the \$420 billion global arms industry, the U.S. armament sector consistently outstrips more visible industries such as car manufacturing and is four times the national education budget. The problem is not simply that this industry looks for customers around the world like any other. Nor is it the revolving doors between the military and weapons and security companies. The issue is that the arms industry has become a way for the ultrawealthy to siphon taxpayer dollars under the cover of the national interest. Its leading firms donate directly to avowedly pro-war candidates, especially those who sit on the Senate Armed Services Committee, with the aim of not only blocking attempts to stop U.S.-backed wars, such as support of the Saudi war on Yemen, but to create the illusion that without U.S. armed forces global capitalism itself would collapse.

There is no reason why a left administration should not demand the best possible military technology in the world, but it should impose stringent requirements on the industrial sector to integrate American defense into American society. The government should more closely regulate the management of the arms companies to which it awards public contracts, including the extent to which workers have a financial and managerial stake in their companies. The government should stop military materiel from being used in domestic policing. (It's

not uncommon for surplus tanks to end up on the streets of places like Ferguson, Missouri.) Trying to completely nationalize a company like Lockheed Martin would be a very costly engagement for a social democratic administration in the short term. In the longer term, however, it would be worth pursuing demands for partial worker ownership of such corporations. But a left international economic agenda wouldn't end at industrial policy. It would recognize that, at least since the Dawes Plan of 1924, which managed the debt payments of Weimar Germany, the main weapon in America's arsenal has been the U.S. Treasury. The United States most commonly expresses its power by allowing and barring access to the U.S. economy. This is an area where a left administration could make a major difference. Loans (and the denial of loans), debt forgiveness, offshore tax havens, currency inflation—these affect the lives of far more people than America's missiles and bombs.

Instead of tying aid to indicators such as the protection of property rights and other rubrics designed by conservative and liberal think tanks, a left administration could instead make aid more contingent on the pursuit of a redistributive domestic agenda or the environmental record of the government in question. Carbon taxes on imports alone could encourage foreign trading partners to put in place more environmentally sustainable domestic policies. Any U.S. left agenda worth the name would need to consider the social welfare of foreign populations in conjunction with taking care of its own.

## 3

**THERE ARE UNCOMFORTABLE POLITICAL AREAS** that no left administration should shy away from. The history of social democracy's relationship with the environment has been a rocky one. Much of the movement's success in the past has been linked to enormous amounts of resource extraction, from the Ruhr in Germany, where the coal furnaces formed one of the backbones of early social democracy, to the great success of the Workers' Party social programs in Brazil, which were in part insulated from right-wing attack because they relied on a vast energy boom that did not require redistributing their wealth. Earlier generations of socialists and social democrats generally did not understand the effect they were having on the climate, but the American working class's relationship to economic growth must be rethought if its citizens are to flourish in the next century. Left foreign-policy practitioners should still prioritize the equitable distribution of resources across society, but they may need to accept that such resources won't be an ever-increasing bounty. This shift in popular values, away from the ideology of growth to the necessity of sustainability, may prove to be the left's most defining challenge.

The second dilemma for any left foreign policy is what to do with fellow movements that are affirmatively socialist in character but under threat from an internal or external power. Should

the United States intervene on behalf of the single social democratic entity in the Middle East, the Kurdish statelet of Rojava? What should a social democratic administration do about reactionary coups against social democratic regimes, such as in Brazil, or freedom movements such as Hong Kong's? Would the United States not have the responsibility to help its friends?

The problem is that, in most cases, any form of explicitly militarist intervention would spell disaster. The age-old question of whether socialism means pacificism or noninterference is unlikely to ever be resolved. But domestic clarity can provide orientation: By working toward a social transformation at home, building up the legitimacy of the American state and the moral legitimacy of its economy, the United States increases its ability to marshal diplomatic pressure on behalf of allies around the world.

There is also the inverse dilemma: What should a left administration do when nominally socialist governments such as Cuba or Venezuela repress their own people? There will always be pressure in Washington to do something in such cases, which at the bare minimum tends to mean backing the opposition, with the possibility of military intervention dangling in the background. Yet left foreign-policy practitioners must have the forbearance to recognize that such solutions generally have little practical promise. Often the opposition groups hailed in Washington have impressive storage space for liberal values but small local followings. Meanwhile, the track record of U.S. military interference in South America has mostly given rise to autocracies. A new foreign policy should instead focus on diplomatic openings, including the possibility that a figure like Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro might have opponents with large public followings to his left.

Which brings us to China. One worrying aspect of the 2020 presidential race is that every serious contender across the spectrum—from Sanders and Warren to Trump himself—have staked out a hostile stance on China. (Michael Bloomberg and Deval Patrick, the candidates most directly involved in international capitalism, may turn out to be the exceptions.) This hostility is not merely about intellectual property or American wages or the hollowing out of the U.S. industrial core or cyberwarfare. There is also a growing sense among many left-of-center Americans that China's repressions on its borderlands must be met head on. Among human rights advocates, a clear agenda is coming into view, which involves activating Uighurs and Hong Kongers and the people of Guangdong to fight Beijing and to help them balance the scales of dignity.

But pursuing such a course would be counterproductive. Chinese President Xi Jinping is in the middle of transforming an industrial-agrarian economy into a massive consumer economy—much as U.S. economists have long advised Beijing to do. The overheating of the Chinese economy has not only resulted in the Belt and Road Initiative as a way of sending excess capital out of the country but also the directed spillover of Mandarin-

speaking populations into Hong Kong (where their presence only aggravates competition over higher education and housing) and the ongoing colonization of Xinjiang. With such an economic transformation underway, it makes good sense for Xi to deflect from this hard reality with speeches about cleansing China of foreign ideologies and undergoing a new round of ideological hygiene. The idea that this world-historical development can be decently improved by any military swagger or hard-line approach seems deluded at best.

More valuable would be to recognize the United States' own role in this unfolding China of the present. The American and Chinese economies are locked in an embrace that can only be dealt with as a totality, rather than piecemeal. Only through diplomacy with China would, for instance, any attempt at forging a serious environmental pact be achievable. No human rights cause in China can be furthered by the United States if it does not use the real economic power at its disposal: fining U.S. companies for doing business in Xinjiang, forcing Apple to comply with U.S. labor regulations abroad, shifting the emphasis of World Bank loans from Chinese corporations to individual Chinese migrants leaving the countryside en masse. Meanwhile, the demonization of China will likely continue to be a profitable hypocrisy for American politicians to engage in.

Whether predominantly social democratic or democratic socialist in character, no left U.S. foreign policy can expect full implementation or success in the short term. It would be naive to believe otherwise. It is not only that the diplomatic corps itself remains embroiled in the Cold War consensus but that foreign policy is merely one domain among others that Americans would need to change and co-opt in concert, such as the judiciary, the intelligence services, and the Federal Reserve. It would be a decent enough start if a Sanders or Warren administration succeeded simply in making left diplomats an inhabitable identity at the State Department, where they are currently an extinct species. It may be that some of the most effective arms of a left U.S. foreign policy are the most mundane. Imagine if the IRS were empowered to pursue wealth taxes globally, giving the 1 percent nowhere to hide. That desk-bound agency may contain more revolutionary tinder than the U.S. Marine Corps. ■

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