

# On the Precipice: A Progressive Agenda in the Biden Era





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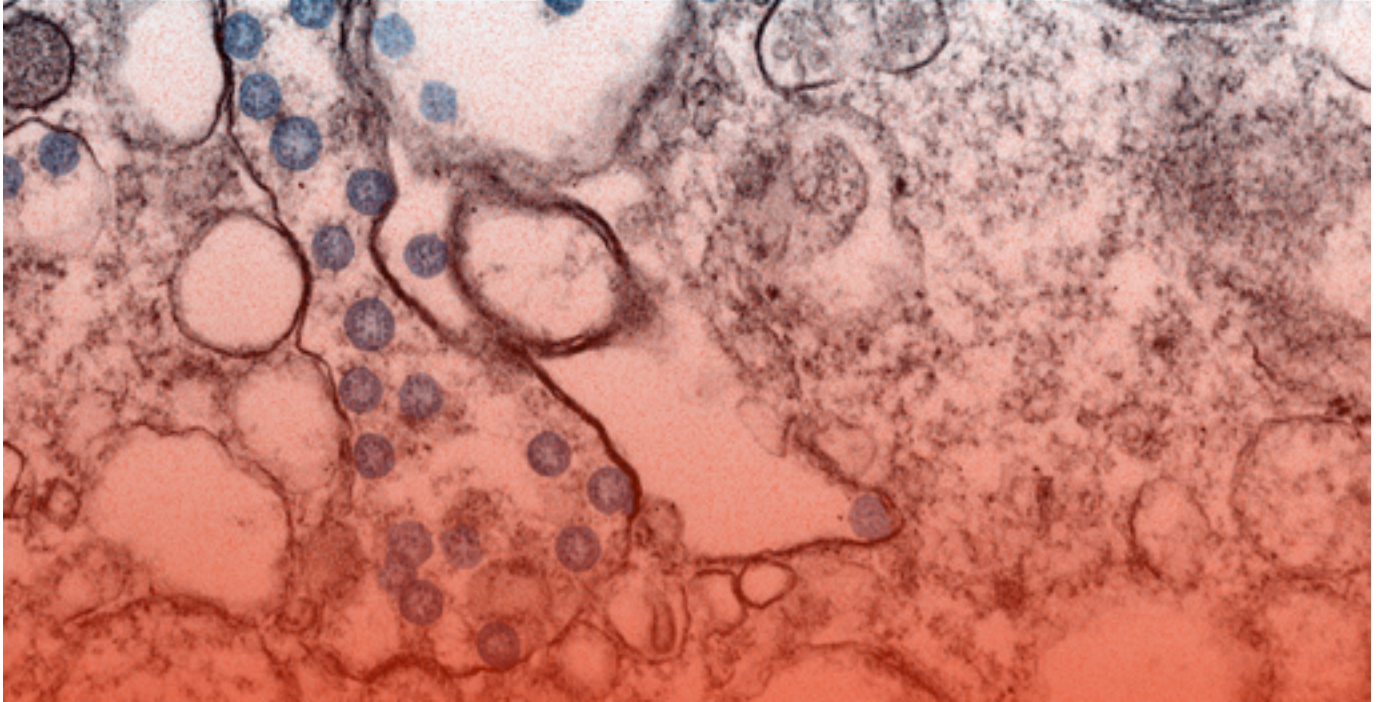
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# Bidenfreude: COVID-19 in the Post-Trump U.S.

By Rob Wallace



Transmission electron microscopic image of an isolate from the first US case of COVID-19, formerly known as 2019-nCoV, a coronavirus, March, 2020. Image courtesy CDC/ Hannah A Bullock, Azaibi Tamin. (Photo by Smith Collection/Gado/Getty Images)

A jokester once characterized Yale University as a hedge fund with a campus attached to it. One might say something similar of the country in which Yale is based.

The United States is abandoning what recently deceased political scientist Leo Panitch described as its responsibilities in managing global capitalism for the bourgeoisie worldwide. With public health and other earmarks of the modern state abandoned within even its own borders, the U.S. seems now more a stock market with a country attached.

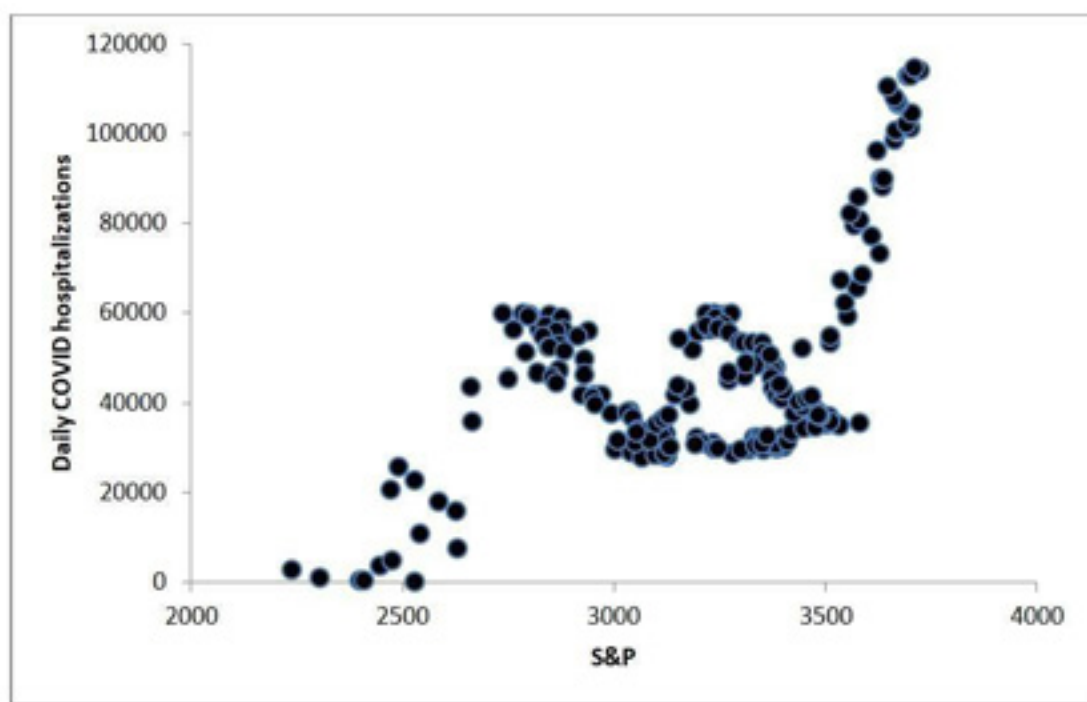
It's true, on the other hand, that the magical thinking of never-ending economic growth has long anchored the American political ethos in settler expansionism. Nothing is more important than perpetual growth. Everything else—even our shared humanity and life on Earth itself—is to be subsumed under that prime directive.

But this year's COVID-19 outbreak alerted the world of a nation's identity turned inside-out like a smelly sock. Rome wasn't built in a day, but the U.S.'s nearly as fast a fall, however part of a *longue durée* decline from the its peak as a center of capital, should flabbergast even the sharpest of radical observers. For even a Biden administration may prove no prophylaxis for the COVID outbreak and American decline overall.

## Graphic Content

The potion of economic growth did not save the day during the pandemic. Those countries that kept their economies opened at the expense of its population's morbidity and mortality—the U.S., Mexico, Chile, Belgium, among others—suffered worse COVID outbreaks and greater economic losses.

Wealth, on the other hand, remained protected, growing in record draughts and in ever greater concentration. Over the pandemic, March to December, the collective wealth of America's 651 billionaires grew by more than a trillion U.S. dollars. That's nearly four times the \$267 billion in one-shot stimulus checks sent to 159 million Americans earlier in the year.



Daily U.S. COVID hospitalizations and S&P 500 closing index, March 17-December 18, 2020.

One can't help but be outraged. Toward the end of the year, a graph circulated on the online left showing a direct relationship between daily S&P Index closings for the top 500 companies' stock prices listed on the exchange and accumulative COVID deaths in the U.S.

On its face, such a vulgarity of "dying for the market" seems a spurious correlation. Accumulative cases are always going to rise. So we might better plot the S&P and COVID hospitalizations for days the market was open, in this case, in the nearby plot, for March 17-Dec 18. Hospitalizations ping up and down upon each COVID wave, marking the immediate state of the outbreak better than cumulative caseload.

We can see here stock prices split through the first two U.S. COVID waves, with different closings in the index—high and low—at the same level of hospitalizations. It appears upon the start of each COVID wave stock prices shorted, bouncing back only on the wave's decline. Research earlier in the outbreak showed just such a negative bias in stock closings, depressing the index more upon bad COVID news than the amount it bounced back upon good.

So the market does react to news in the real world, even as financialization—investing in debt and currency—is increasingly divorced from the real economy (and the vast majority of people's everyday lives). Or, in the more updated interpretation, as financialization increasingly drives the real economy regardless of the various perverse outcomes.

Geographer Albina Gibadullina recently plotted financialization by industrial sector across countries. The state of alienation in the U.S. across sectors is such that betting on the debt backing the economy increasingly supersedes outright investment in real commodities. Sudden disasters don't roll our high-end gamblers back to reality, however. Not even back to the capitalist reality of the kinds of use value that might seem necessary to protect a system in crisis.

Sociologist John Bellamy Foster and colleagues describe financialization picking up in pace during the worst of damage brought about by the present pandemic. The resulting impacts aren't felt just in stock portfolios or bond derivatives. With less revenue from elective surgery and other blows to projected profits, U.S. hospitals, for instance, are firing nurses during the worst outbreak in a hundred years.

Our S&P graph suggests that at the other end of the outbreak, even as hospitalizations are exploding in record number, with the vaccines rolling

out and a Biden administration rolling in, things, from the vantage of capital, may be looking up. Capital will survive—even prosper—through half-a-million U.S. deaths its professional-managerial class largely dodged by staying at home.

So we may have here a positive bias later in the outbreak. Terrible news on the daily doesn't depress stocks now that the bourgeoisie appears in the clear.

Here, then, we find ourselves back at the vulgar interpretation we thought we'd circumvent in favor of nuance. Because the rest of the U.S. is in terrible shape. Three-to-four times more of the population is hungry than an already unconscionable baseline. Millions have filed for inadequate unemployment insurance. Shoplifting of staples like food and diapers is at record levels. Tens of thousands of COVID deaths, more than that of many countries combined, have been attributed to housing evictions alone.

The overall trend apparent even in our rough graph from March to December—up, up, up—supersedes the dynamics of the stock market's blips here and there. The resulting massacre—COVID and otherwise—is teaching Americans an abject lesson, at least for those in a position to assimilate it.

## **The extreme center's gambit**

The lesson can be so easily lost. The tumult of a political class at odds with itself forces the country to choose sides that are not of its own making.

The hard part is not letting January's Trumpist putsch and the second impeachment that followed confuse matters. Certainly these histories count and defeating the fascist creep is always a front-and-center task. The roiling itself speaks to the bourgeoisie's struggles with administering an empire in decline home and abroad.

But we need to keep in mind that politicians of both major parties—Democratic and Republican—spent this past year organizing themselves around simultaneously bailing out billionaires, now far richer than ever in only a few short months, and minimizing paying the poorest of Americans trying to survive a deadly pandemic.

Congress passed a lousy \$1200 of assistance per American earlier in 2020. It then dragged its ass for months at the end of the year before finally agreeing on another \$600. A push to up the second payout to \$2000 was



turned aside in the name of fiscal responsibility. The debate was cut off with a vote in favor of a military budget greater than the world's next ten largest military budgets combined. Biden's latest offer to fold in another \$1400 nowhere near approaches what smaller countries have been offering their citizens monthly from the pandemic's start.

The lesson couldn't be clearer. Under this system, Americans are to be given money to reproduce themselves only in the course of helping capital accumulate. Not even a pandemic is enough to interrupt imposing social identities tied largely to company productivity. People will just have to die if their living disrupts the very expropriation that brought about the pandemic.



A vial of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine is displayed at UNLV on January 12, 2021 in Las Vegas, Nevada. (Photo by Ethan Miller/Getty Images)

In short, the present U.S. system is a death cult. And it isn't administered just by Trump administrators propounding herd immunity into late summer, but by an incoming administration ready to get people back to work with vaccines that appear unlikely to stop transmission.

The irony is that a system that for decades neglected public health as a commons, and so upon COVID was unable to administer nonpharmaceutical interventions, may now display a remarkable incapacity to distribute a pharmaceutical one it took such pride in producing.

In refusing to pay and protect the populace in its time of sacrifice, the political class may have lost the public's trust. And the contacts and networks needed to connect people mind and body to public health as a shared fate were long destroyed for an S&P that the Biden administration aims to protect.

Even months before inauguration, Biden and his COVID response embodied as much of the epoch's exhausted spirit as Trump. While Trump represents the system's id, Biden campaigned as its science-touting superego, only now, once elected, he's back to acting its trap of a structurally imposed ego.

Capitalist realism, as far down as its alienated bedrock of climate collapse and dehumanizing labor markets, is at this point as delusional as the flat-earthism it looks down upon and the ecomodernism—thinking technology enough to reverse climate change—to which it gravitates.

If the extreme center cannot hold, it is because in its ideological policing, blocking any alternative to the present shitshow, it appears, on the one hand, on track to accelerating civilization's environmental crash. On the other hand, its celebrated failures of imagination open the way to the rise of more competent fascists.

Every step along the way the center champions "building back better" for the settler billionaires first and foremost. Even during COVID, the wealthy's successes continue to destitute much of the world, global North and South. And yet former president Barack Obama spent 2020 campaigning against even a whiff of socialist or liberationist amelioration—intervening against the Bernie Sanders campaign, Black Lives Matter, the NBA wildcat strike, and the Squad of democratic socialist representatives in Congress.

Obama's purring negation emerged out of the same insipid source as Biden's decision to rehire agribusiness lobbyist Tom Vilsack for Secretary of Agriculture. With whole swaths of rural countryside enraged enough by the damage of neoliberal agriculture to flirt with fascism. Now that is some inspired thinking there! Let's return the U.S. back to the conditions that brought about Trump in the first place.

Bidenfreude—relief in Trump’s defeat but little joy—offers no exit out of the existential trap the men from Hope (here and here) spring upon the American electorate every four years.

The only egress is disconnecting out of the neoliberal imaginarium. There are thousands of years of alternate paradigms—Indigenous, smallholder, working class—at fundamental odds with the present political class’s tottering brinkmanship. It’s time to start parsing through these alternatives, experimenting with them anew, whatever the lengths to which the Yale-educated and other “best and brightest” scold us.

## **Pragmatic interventions require radical utopianism**

Escaping the head space (and programmatic options) neoliberalism imposes for far better socioecological pastures, where people and place are treated as more than their productivities—that’s the pandemic path forward.

As I’ve described in greater detail elsewhere, once there, pragmatic interventions, in this case for COVID, flow as a matter of course:

1. Go for the knockout. Aim for the kind of total COVID suppression other countries far less wealthy were able to complete in a matter of months without a vaccine.
2. Scale up community health for the pandemic we have (not the one we wish we had). Scale up hospital capacity, testing, contact tracing, and vaccine and PPE distribution—all made free to the public—to match the numbers SARS-CoV-2 is operating with, not what the capitalist state cares to pay for. That is, unlike Trump and now Biden, follow what science models is a proper intervention.
3. Suspend capitalism. Quarantines don’t work if only the rich can stay home. Pay people who are working non-essential jobs to stay home. Pause their rent, mortgages, and debts. Feed them from municipalized restaurants and food trucks. Check in on them with millions of newly hired community health workers. Pay essential workers hazard pay and supply enough PPE and vaccine so that, as was reported here and here, they don’t have to fistfight over what’s available.

4. Celebrate the pandemic's end. Continue to pay people to take a couple weeks off to celebrate society's victory over an existential threat. We should consecrate the end of the scourge as a repudiation of capitalism's death march through our lives and its role in driving the emergence of pandemic strains to begin with. Looking around the wreckage, we might discover we prefer this new option.
5. Reintroduce agriculture and nature. To keep COVID-21, -22, and -23 from emerging next, whether as another SARS or as an avian influenza, Ebola, African swine fever, or any of the hundreds of potential proto-pandemics, we must end global agribusiness, logging, and mining as we know them. We need to reintroduce the mosaic food landscapes of complex ecologies and agrobiodiversities that disrupt the evolution of the deadliest of pathogens.
6. Return rural sovereignty. Such interventions require returning rural communities their locus of control. We must turn to the kind of state planning that centers farmer autonomy, community socioeconomic resilience, circular economies, integrated cooperative supply networks, food justice, land trusts, and reparations. We must undo deeply historical race, class, and gender trauma at the center of land grabbing and environmental alienation.
7. Imagine humanity beyond the market. Such a political reordering requires that we end the unequal ecological exchange between the Global North and South. It requires that we plant a different political philosophy in the landscape, making a better balance of humanity's appropriation of Earth's resources and healing the metabolic rift between ecology and economy.

So seven points to start. With much more to do. But look what we can begin to think through when the Obamas, Trumps, and Bidens of the world, whether in the flesh or in our own heads, are unable to interrupt us.

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# Pushing Biden to Address the U.S.' Housing Crisis

## By Oksana Mironova



Demonstrators lock arms as they stage a sit in at the Kings Supreme & Family Court Building during a 'Resist Evictions' rally to protest evictions on August 10, 2020 in New York City. (Photo by Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images)

When president-elect Biden moves into his new Washington DC home in late January, an estimated 30 million people in the US will be in danger of losing theirs. As the pandemic engulfed the US over the past year, greater housing insecurity emerged as both a byproduct of this public health crisis, and yet another factor propelling Covid's spread. Black and Latinx renters in particular are facing mounting levels of rent debt and the looming threat of eviction.

The pandemic represents a sudden shock to an overburdened system, after decades of deregulation, budget cuts, and overall federal withdrawal from housing provision. Before the pandemic began, there was no state, metropolitan area, or county in the US where a minimum wage worker was able to afford a decent two-bedroom apartment. Nearly 570,000 people were homeless. With the long term economic impact of the pandemic, these figures are likely to dramatically expand in 2021.

Federal housing policy has withered under a stringent austerity regime over the past four decades. However, in 2020, racial and economic justice

movements pushed Democratic presidential candidates to develop responses to the US's housing crisis. Both the Biden and Harris campaigns proposed spending billions of dollars on housing programs, an ideological shift for the Democratic party. However, their proposals are also indicative of a continuing commitment to market-based solutions and minor legal reforms, which are unlikely to meet the scale of crisis at hand, or address structural issues within the housing market that reproduce racial inequality.

At the same time, the US is seeing a resurgence of housing centered organizing, pushing away from incrementalism and toward a complete overhaul of housing, as said by Tara Raghuveer of Kansas City Tenants. With Democrats winning slim control over the federal legislative branch, Biden's administration will have to respond to growing local organizing around key housing issues, like eviction and homelessness.

## **Federal housing policy, from Reagan to Trump**

Biden's approach to housing should be viewed in the context of budget and policy decisions made by preceding federal administrations. Over the past four years, the Trump administration attempted to punitively impose racist, transphobic, and anti-immigrant measures throughout the whole state apparatus, excluding transgender people from housing assistance, targeting undocumented immigrants receiving housing subsidies, and rescinding federal laws addressing racial discrimination. Trump's proposed housing spending cuts were less successful, largely as a result of anti-austerity mobilizations by housing organizers. However, decades before Trump's election, the US federal government cut funding, weakened regulations, and generally withdrew from low-cost housing provision.

Deep cuts to social safety net spending, including housing programs, accelerated under the Reagan administration (1981-1988), propelled forward by an interconnected ideological commitment to anti-communism and white supremacy. In 1981, a spokesperson for the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the federal agency that oversees housing programs, made clear that "the whole attitude that the federal government can solve all the housing problems of this country-those days are over." The administration proceeded to make deep cuts to the main housing programs of the time, including public housing, which provided

funding for new development and the ongoing operations of housing subsidized directly by the federal government, and Section 8, which provided rental housing assistance to private landlords on behalf of low-income households either in project-based form, or in the form of vouchers. Reagan cut the HUD budget by three-quarters, from \$32 billion in 1981 to \$7.5 billion by 1988.

While slashing federal housing assistance, the administration also sidelined and ignored federal anti-discrimination laws hard won by civil rights organizers. These laws included the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which provided the legal basis for challenging racist lending and real estate practices, and the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977, which incentivized mortgage lending in low- and moderate-neighborhoods as an antidote to redlining, or what scholar David Imbroscio calls “the codification of racist market rationality”, especially anti-Blackness, by the federal government and private mortgage lenders. The Reagan administration described its drive to “unleash the free market” through budget cuts and weakening regulation over the lending and real estate sectors in race-neutral terms. However, the property market is not a force of nature but rather, according to scholar and activist Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, “a reflection of our values”, with “race is at the very center.” Overall, these federal rollbacks were a revanchist drive against gains made by organizers in the previous decades.

After Reagan, federal housing spending continued to wither under both Republican and Democratic administrations. In 1996, the same year that Clinton (1993-2000) promised to “end welfare as we know it”, the New York Times Magazine lamented that “protesters hit the streets during the early years of Ronald Reagan’s presidency when the government slashed the number of new families getting [rental assistance] help to 40,000 a year, from previous highs of about 400,000. Oh, for the good old Reagan days: the bill that President Clinton signed last month drops the number to zero.” George W. Bush’s (2001-2008) lavish tax cuts and military expenditures early on his presidency led to a budget deficit, which justified cuts to affordable housing programs later on. Under the Obama administration (2009-2016), a national debt-ceiling crisis manufactured by a further emboldened Republican party, acted as a justification for reductions on all social safety net spending through 2021, including reductions to public housing and rental assistance.

With a stringent, four decade austerity regime as a backdrop, federal support of the mortgage market—both in the form of bailouts to lending institutions in times of crisis and ongoing subsidies to landlords and wealthy

white homeowners—has ballooned. Many of these subsidies are delivered through the tax code and are largely hidden from both public scrutiny and from the annual federal budgeting process, where cuts to social safety net programs get made, cementing the idea of a racialized welfare recipient and a race-neutral property market.

## **Where is federal housing policy headed in 2021?**

Federal housing policy came into focus during the 2020 Democratic primary, as local organizers from racial and economic justice movements pushed presidential candidates to develop responses to the US's housing crisis. While campaign proposals are only a rough guide to the policies that presidential administrations actually enact, the Biden and Harris campaigns' housing plans provide insights into their overall priorities. Both committed to spending billions of dollars on housing programs, a first since the late 1960s. This, within itself is an ideological shift left for the Democratic party, and an expansion above the baseline set by preceding administrations. However, both plans largely rely on existing affordable housing programs without addressing their flaws, and do not grapple with structural issues within the US housing market. Below, I outline some of the major policies put forward by both campaigns, and provide examples of proposals from both inside and outside the electoral landscape to strengthen them.

### **Housing Production**

A central aspect of Biden's housing plan is the expansion of existing affordable housing production programs, including an annual \$10 Billion allocation of funding for existing state block grant programs and homelessness assistance grants. This figure includes a \$2 Billion commitment to the National Housing Trust Fund, an eight-fold increase in funding for the first new federal housing program in over 40 years to explicitly serve extremely low-income renters. While this is an ambitious increase in federal funding for affordable housing production, it pales in comparison to both historical precedent set by the New Deal and Great Society funding commitments, and competing contemporary housing proposals, like Bernie Sanders' \$148 billion a year commitment to the National Housing Trust Fund.

Biden's housing plan ignores US's embattled public housing stock, the federal program that provides permanent housing to low-income renters



with deepest levels of affordability, covering about 1.2 million apartments. There are multiple proposals that address the public housing funding deficit resulting from federal budget cuts, including Representative Nydia Velázquez's Public Housing Emergency Response Act that would allocate \$70 billion for capital repairs and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal for Public Housing Act, which would commit up to \$172 billion over ten years to green retrofits.

While public housing represents just one program in a constellation of federal housing policies, its systematic destruction is symbolic of a federal commitment to market-based solutions that privilege the needs of investors and landlords in program design over the social functions of housing. This market bias continues to shape the structure of federal housing programs, often resulting in the privatization of public benefits at the expense of low-income people. A recent example are the federal programs that incentivized Wall Street investment in foreclosed homes, giving rise to the single family home rental market dominated by corporate landlords in the wake of the 2008 mortgage crisis.

Over the past few years, both organizers and elected officials have put forward proposals that not only call for a major increase in federal housing spending, but intentionally set the groundwork for a broader federal housing program reorientation toward the social functions of housing. For example, the People's Action's Homes Guarantee campaign has called for the development of 12 million homes outside of the speculative housing market. The related Homes for All Act, introduced by Representative Ilhan Omar, would authorize the construction of 12 million new public and social housing units, while making public housing a mandatory part of the federal budget, thus making it more difficult to defund. At the same time, the Movement for Black Lives' policy platform calls for federal support for institutions that build Black community wealth, including residential cooperatives and land trusts, while the Urban Democracy Lab's Social Housing Development Authority (SHDA) proposal would create a new agency to acquire and rehabilitate distressed housing. These proposals would go a long way toward reorienting the type of housing production federal policy supports.

## **Rental Assistance**

Along with more federal subsidies for housing production, Biden and Harris have both called for an expansion of rental assistance. Biden proposed to expand the federal Housing Choice Voucher Program, also known as Section 8. Under Section 8, the federal government provides direct

assistance to low-income tenants to pay for part of their rent in private apartments. Currently, only one in four income-eligible families receives a voucher, but Biden's plan would increase funding so that every eligible family could be served. During her campaign, Harris also put forward a plan that would provide rent assistance in the form of an income tax credit for families with somewhat higher incomes who nevertheless pay unaffordable rents.



Housing advocates and tenants march to demand that New York Governor Cuomo cancel rent as the unemployment crisis continues due to the COVID-19 pandemic on October 10, 2020 in Harlem, New York. (Photo by Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis via Getty Images)

Scholars and activists have long critiqued the Section 8 voucher program for reinforcing segregation, transferring public wealth into private hands, and inflating rents. Biden's housing plan incorporates some legal provisions that address Section 8 critiques, including a law that would make it illegal for landlords to discriminate against voucher holders in the tenant selection process and a program that would help tenants facing eviction access legal assistance. However, these provisions do not go far enough to limit the potential for rent inflation and mitigation of bad landlord behavior. To prevent landlords from hiking up rents, the federal government should implement a national rent control standard and additional eviction protections, as outlined in Bernie Sanders' campaign proposal. Further, rent assistance payments should be tied to increased enforcement of housing codes, tenant protections, and anti-harassment statutes.

Vouchers, in essence, are a method for providing ongoing operational assistance for the buildings in which their recipients live. Within the context of our contemporary rental market, this means that they help private

landlords generate profit and expand their real estate portfolios. However, if paired with an expansion of a social housing sector, they can provide support for the ongoing maintenance of the social function of housing.

Lastly, a rental assistance program will do little to help with a catastrophic looming rental debt crisis, set off by the pandemic. Rental assistance should be preceded by a rent debt jubilee as described by one of the Los Angeles Tenants Union founders in a recent *The Nation* piece.

## **Racial Equity**

The Biden and Harris campaigns both acknowledged the role the federal government played in exacerbating segregation and widening the racial wealth gap through housing and lending policy. Both promised to reinstate legal anti-discrimination tools scuttled by the Trump administration, including the implementation of the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Rule, a 2015 mandate requiring municipalities to study and mitigate housing segregation. Both campaigns also planned on using the federal government's power to enforce settlements against discriminatory lenders, a practice stopped by the Trump administration.

While Biden's housing plan acknowledges the pervasiveness of racial discrimination in real estate, it stops far short of using the federal government's full power to challenge racist real estate practices by local governments and lending institutions. For example, Biden calls for the elimination of exclusionary zoning, or local land use ordinances that ban the development of apartment buildings and otherwise allow wealthy white localities to reinforce segregation, without running afoul of the Fair Housing Act. Biden's plan calls for states receiving federal housing and transportation funding to merely develop strategies to encourage inclusionary zoning, a weak gesture against exclusionary zoning without enforcement mechanisms.

Biden's plan also calls for a national standard for housing appraisals, linking the undervaluing of Black neighborhoods to "implicit biases because of a lack of community understanding," ignoring the explicit codification of what housing expert Charles Abrams, called the "racist theory of value" into the property appraisal system during the professionalization of the modern real estate industry in the 1920s.

Access to homeownership is central to both the Biden and Harris proposals, with Harris calling for a \$100B down payment assistance program for people renting or living in historically redlined communities, with the

explicit goal of addressing the racial wealth gap. While an expansion of federal down payment assistance isn't within itself bad policy, it is unlikely to address the racial wealth gap on its own. It is focused on what historian Destin Jenkins calls "disparities in the acquisition of wealth," rather than "racial disparities in the defense of wealth: the relative ability to defend wealth from expropriation, whether through violence, state-sanctioned seizure, and sometimes both." The US real estate and lending markets continue to expose both Black homeowners and Black renters to greater levels of risk, including subprime mortgages, discrimination by insurers, and deed theft in gentrifying neighborhoods. A policy organized around the defense of Black wealth should both regulate and hold accountable existing private institutions that continue to profit off a segregated housing market.

## What's possible?

The housing proposals put forward by the Biden and Harris campaigns are both a sign of shifting priorities within the Democratic party, and are indicative of its limitations. Further, the tepid response from the party's leadership to a looming eviction crisis shows how far the US is from a major commitment to social housing or from dismantling racist lending institutions.

At the same time, the conservatism of the Democratic party's leadership is not within itself an indication that change isn't possible. Looking back on the Lincoln, Roosevelt and Johnson presidencies, labor organizer Bob Master writes that it was "a combination of crisis and mass movements that transformed these presidents, pushing them to enact far-reaching policies that were unimaginable at the beginning of their tenures." With control of both the legislative branch and the presidency, the Democratic party is in a position to meaningfully respond to the US housing crisis.

2020 election results locally show that bold housing initiatives are likely to be popular with the general public. For example, voters in Denver approved a .25% sales tax increase to fund homeless services and voters in Charlotte, NC passed a \$50 million bond issue for the Charlotte Housing Trust Fund. Grassroots groups across the US, in Kansas City, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles, are already successfully mobilizing around housing. Ultimately, Biden's approach to the housing crisis will depend on the ability of an energized mass movement centered around racial and economic justice to put pressure on the Democratic party to take bold steps like forgiving rent debt, holding leaders accountable, or passing the Green New Deal for public housing.



*Oksana Mironova is a writer and researcher who was born in the former Soviet Union and grew up in Brooklyn, NY. She writes about cities, urban planning, housing, and public space. You can follow her on twitter [@OksanaMironov](#) or read more of her writing at [oksana.nyc](#).*

# The High Stakes of Defending Public Education

## By Ujju Aggarwal



Teachers continue their strike at the state capitol on April 9, 2018 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. (Photo by J Pat Carter/Getty Images)

The past four years of the Trump administration's multi-pronged attempts to hollow out public education—through changes in the tax code, the expansion of markets through choice policies and voucher-schemes, attacks on labor, rescinding civil rights, and codifying curriculum and teaching—demonstrate the significance of education as one of the last remaining public goods in the United States, *and* as a site of some of the fiercest battles of liberation movements in the U.S. and elsewhere.

*What should the Biden administration do when it comes to education?*

The question provokes us to return to Audre Lorde's [insight](#), that there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we don't lead single-issue lives. Indeed, as education studies scholar Jean Anyon [wrote](#), "[e]ducation is an institution whose basic problems are caused by, and whose basic problems reveal, the other crises in cities: poverty, joblessness and low-wages, and racial and class segregation...a focus on urban education can expose the combined effects of public policies, and highlight not only poor schools but the entire nexus of constraints on urban families." That is, the escalated and daily war on Black, Brown, immigrant, and poor

communities through countless policies and practices (ranging from ICE raids to cuts to food stamps) is also an intensified and systemic attack on the public infrastructures (schools) charged with reproducing life through education and daily acts of care.

While public schools have historically worked counter to this charge of promoting care, well-being, and development and instead, have often functioned as sites of racialized dispossession, they also present a [terrain of struggle over what our social relations might be](#). The global pandemic has brought this reality of interconnectedness and vulnerability *and* the race—and class—based fault lines of deep structural inequities into sharp focus. The crises of the past year have also raised questions related to the role of the state and the meaning—and structure—of the public, highlighting the need to move beyond individual solutions to collective problems. Yet this basic tenet has become harder to imagine in the accelerated version of racial capitalism in which we live, where Education Secretary Betsy DeVos’s call to [“invest in individual students not school buildings”](#) echoes, of course, Margaret Thatcher’s famous declaration that “there’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.” This is the logic that guides, for example, the initiative to [“reimagine education”](#) that New York State is partnering with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on, and that which has also guided education reform for decades.

As we enter the Biden administration, many policy analysts are calling on the Biden administration to look back toward many of the Obama-era education reforms as a roadmap. But going back to a “normal” neoliberalism is the opposite of what we need. It was during the Obama administration that Race to the Top, essentially a structural adjustment program for public education in the United States, along with the reformist reform of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), were passed. ESSA largely affirmed and re-packaged Bush administration’s draconian [No Child Left Behind Act](#), which pushed forward an aggressive neoliberal agenda in education that included the establishment of mandatory high-stakes tests for grades 3-8 as well as school choice policies. Among other measures, ESSA maintains standardized high-stakes testing, teacher merit pay, and mandatory military recruitment at high schools that receive federal funding. It was also the Obama administration’s education policies, including the promotion of austerity budgets as the [“new normal”](#) that laid the groundwork for the conditions that propelled teachers across the country to organize insurgent wildcat strikes over the past several years; and, of course, it was during the Obama administration that Black Lives Matter was founded. In other words, the normal signified by the Obama administration was killing us.

So what *should* the Biden administration do about education? This is a hard question to imagine asking of a president-elect who is known for having staunchly opposed school desegregation efforts, sponsored of the 1994 Crime Bill, and who, in recent remarks on #defundthepolice, noted that he was opposed to taking money away from police budgets and instead, favored getting more money to ensure greater “effectiveness” in policing. While Biden claims to be a “friend of education,” and especially teachers’ unions, he supported the No Child Left Behind Act and also [backed a 2005 bill](#) that “made it nearly impossible for students in financial distress to discharge their student loans.” It is also a hard question to ask of the incoming Vice President-elect Kamala Harris who—despite her invocation of her parents’ commitment to Black freedom struggles—[fought for measures](#) that are fundamentally opposed to Black freedom, among them, [one that](#) “raised the financial penalty and made it a criminal misdemeanor for parents, up to a year in jail, when their children missed at least 10 percent of school time.”

While it is hard to imagine what to ask, or expect, of the Biden administration, the crises of the past year have made clear the stakes of the question. The global pandemic has demonstrated the essential role of schools as public infrastructures that are a backbone of the local, state, and national economies and integral to the functioning of society at large. It has also taught us that anything—and everything—is possible, *and* that we must be led by the radical imagination of the grassroots.

The long standing [organizing](#) undertaken by parents, teachers, and students have made changes that we were told were not practical, or possible. When it comes to high-stakes standardized testing, for example, communities drew upon their lived experience, as well as volumes of research that demonstrate the historical roots of such exams in racial science, making clear the multidimensional harms of testing policies. It was this organizing that made it possible that, in a time of “emergency,” federal and state officials determined that testing could be cancelled for the duration of the pandemic. Other things that we were told were not “realistic” range in scope and scale from the provision of school nurses, to eviction moratoriums that ensured increasing numbers of students do not become houseless. We need to continue these measures beyond the pandemic, and expand these wins to include the immediate and full cancellation of student debt as called for by the [Debt Collective](#). This debt has been accumulated as the result of higher education trying to save itself through the creation of new (student) markets, intensified corporatization, and predatory lending.



Indeed, we have learned much in the past months about political will, as well as the need to be bold in imagining what we determine to be “win-nable.” [As historian Robin D.G. Kelley reminds us](#), creativity, experimentation, and freedom dreams are integral to progressive social movements. As he writes, “We must remember that the conditions and the very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way.” That is, the things we have today would not have been possible if people had not imagined, made, or fought for them first. The [Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast for Children Program](#), established in 1966, being one of the most famous examples, which provided model for the national school breakfast and lunch program six years later. Rather than more of the same, in asking what the Biden administration should do about education, it is to the concrete demands produced by the radical imaginations of the grassroots in daily and multi-scalar struggles that we must look.

The recently passed COVID-19 Economic Relief Bill allocated \$82 billion broadly to education (Education Stabilization Fund). Of these funds, \$54.3 billion are directed to K-12 public schools, 90% of which needs to go to public schools with allotments “[based on their proportional share of ESEA Title I-A funds](#).” The distribution of the remaining 10% of funds are left to the discretion of states. Yet, these combined federal relief funds [are a far cry from what is needed](#), as “[a]dvocates for public education estimate that schools have lost close to \$200 billion so far.” The impact of these piecemeal relief funds [will be largely determined in struggles over budgets](#) this next year, which will determine if the funds simply fill in the gaps of austerity budgets or if they provide some much needed resources. Moreover, the Education Stabilization Fund (ESF) does cover costs associated with the E-Rate program, which aids schools in purchasing computers and internet access. In line with the DeVosian logic of investing in students, not systems or school buildings, the ESF does “[include funds meant to help low-income families access the internet](#).”

It’s clear that [budgets](#) will continue to be a key battleground site, and as we approach this next year of [budget struggles](#), we can learn from the [research, organizing, and demands](#) put forward by the Los Angeles Teachers Union (LATU). They have linked calls to defund the police to an increase in state funding for schools, the expansion of schools (and jobs), a moratorium on charter schools, and an end to housing security. Operationalizing the abolitionist driven invest-divest framework and drawing on a key [policy platform of the Movement for Black Lives](#), the LATU and the student, teacher, and parent-led [#StudentsDeserve envision and demand](#) “real support for Black communities, communities of color, and poor and working

class communities of color.” [As #StudentsDeserve explains](#), This means schools with smaller class sizes and more arts, electives, college counselors, therapists, librarians, custodians, and healthcare services....Investing in public schools is also part of challenging policing, privatization, charter school expansion, and reconstitutions or school closures and conversions. When our communities have well-funded and high quality public schools, we don’t need to turn to charter schools or rely on policing.” LATU and #StudentsDeserve remind us, schools are institutions of the state. Instead of austerity or state withdrawal, we need a *redistribution* of funding. We need to *#defundthepolice* and a new deal for public education.

This next year, as our cities emerge from the pandemic, will be a year of intensified local—yet networked—struggles. Recently, the New York City MTA threatened to slash over nine thousand jobs and cut service dramatically. At the same time, as school workers across the nation are fighting to keep schools closed amidst the surge, debates have also ensued as to [how school district budgets](#)—and jobs—will be impacted. Currently, there are [over six million public school workers](#) in the United States. As questions loom regarding what public school enrollment will look like, a recent study from the Pew Charitable Trusts notes that “U.S. Department of Labor estimates show that state and local education employment was down 8.8% in October from the previous year, representing the lowest national jobs total at that point in the school year since 2000...The majority of the mostly temporary education job cuts have hit local public schools, driving employment in the sector down in nearly every state from September 2019 to September 2020.” Further, recent reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that in December 2019, 140,000 net jobs were lost nationally. That [Black and Latinx women](#) account for the entirety of the net jobs lost reminds us once again—in no uncertain terms—that the violence of austerity works through race and gender.

As we face intensified precarity, we can learn much from looking to movements of the Global South and their long-standing struggles against neoliberal reforms that have only guaranteed the violence of political and economic insecurity. The [historic farmers and agricultural workers’ strike](#) in [India](#), for example, is an articulation of the radical imagination to which Kelley refers. We can also look to the organizing waged by poor and working class communities of color who have long-confronted precarity in the Global North, many of which have been emboldened by a concept that Henri Lefebvre termed, *the right to the city*. As geographer Kafui A. Attoah [explains](#), the right to the city “signifies the right to inhabit the city, the right to produce urban life on new terms (unfettered by the demands of exchange value), and the right of inhabitants to remain unalienated from

urban life.” Or, as one member of Operation Move-In, a squatting movement on New York City’s Upper West Side in the 1970s, led by El Comité-MINP (Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño/Puerto Rican National Left Movement), [put it](#), “[w]e are the people who build this city. We work here. We work in factories, hospitals, supermarkets, subways, banks....so we *are* the city.” It was also El Comité that fought, for over a decade during the same time period as Operation Move-In (and building on the legacy of the Movement for Community Control of Schools), to establish one of the first dual language programs in New York City (also on the Upper West Side).



FstA view of teachers and 1st grade students in the gym at Yung Wing School P.S. 124 on January 13, 2021 in New York City. (Photo by Michael Luccisano/Getty Images)

To be sure, the fight for schools is a dialectical fight, against the race and class based dispossession of [organized abandonment](#), and *for* the place-making project of collective futures. Looking back to the [#FightforDyett’s 34 day](#) hunger strike embarked on in 2015 by Black parents, grandparents, teachers, and community members in Chicago’s historic Bronzeville neighborhood, we see that embedded in contestations over schools is a question of in whose image our cities will be remade. To be sure, the Coalition to Revitalize Dyett was about re-claiming, defending, and transforming a school *and* the place of Bronzeville. As education studies scholar Eve L. Ewing [points out](#), the coalition’s proposed plan for the school “was based on community outreach to local parents over the course of 18 months and was intended to create a sense of stability and solidarity in a part of the city rocked by years of school closures.” Ewing [reminds](#) us that “[a] fight for a school is never just about a school.” Indeed, it is a fight for people in a place, and the joined futures of the two.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore [notes that](#) “Policy is to politics what method is to research. It’s the script for enlivening some future possibility, an experiment.” It not by chance that liberation movements from the Zapatistas to the Cuban revolution to the long Black Freedom struggle in the United States—and beyond—have identified education as a key means, method, and site of struggle in the gargantuan experiments of liberation. In the United States, as W.E.B. DuBois teaches us in the freedom making experiment that was *Black Reconstruction in American 1860-1880*, the first truly universal public schools were set up by free Black communities in the reconstruction period. As we look to the Biden administration, let us invoke this legacy of insurgent experimentation and radical imagination, and be guided by the expertise and grounded praxis of grassroots movements.

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# Class Struggle and Solidarity: What Labor Still Needs Under Biden

By Kari Thompson



People protest working conditions outside of an Amazon warehouse fulfillment center on May 1, 2020 in the Staten Island borough of New York City. (Photo by Stephanie Keith/Getty Images)

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage, the deck remains stacked against the working class: a faltering economy with sky-rocketing inequality; bad labor laws and an even worse business-friendly judiciary enforcing them; trade policies that cede too many rights to corporations; unchecked climate chaos; and complacency in too many parts of organized labor. The incoming Biden administration projects it's desire to be the most labor-friendly presidential administration ever, but without organized public pressure, they quickly will be mired in merely reversing problems created in the last four years without any plan to comprehensively address the structural losses of the last 40 years. This kind of piecemeal approach will not be enough to advance the change working people need. A better future for workers and labor is possible, but only if we demand it.



## Present Context

In August, the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) General Executive Board, comprised of elected rank and file members and UE's national officers, issued a [statement](#) declaring that "The working class cannot afford four more years of Trump," and recognized that the only way "to oust Trump from office...is to elect Joe Biden."

Less an endorsement of Biden so much as a grounded understanding of the actions the Trump administration had taken, they wrote: "President Trump has attacked workers' rights much more aggressively than any of his predecessors, weakening regulations and stacking the Department of Labor, the National Labor Relations Board and OSHA with corporate henchmen. His appointments to the Supreme Court resulted in anti-worker rulings, including the *Janus* decision to weaken public-sector unions, and his ongoing effort to fill the federal courts with anti-worker judges promises more such decisions well into the future."

On November 3, in an election with record-high turnout, Biden was elected president. According to exit polls, working-class voters made up a larger share of the electorate and voted more Democratic than they had in the 2016 presidential election, while wealthy households continued to vote more heavily for Trump. Of people voting in union households 57% voted for Biden this year while 40% voted for Trump, a significant shift compared to 2016, when Trump only lost the union household vote by eight points. This is a good result for labor. It offers the opportunity for unions to put forward bold demands for what the Biden administration should do to improve both conditions for organizing and the economy more broadly.

Unfortunately, it seems that so far, labor leaders are focused on *who* will head the Labor Department, not *what* that person should be doing and *how* it should dovetail with other economic policies. That it took Biden so long to nominate his longtime friend Marty Walsh for the position is somewhat discomfiting, and it suggests Biden's own lack of clear vision for what this person should accomplish.

Ultimately, organized labor must have a more programmatic approach to improving its power through advancing workers' economic interests. While the dramatic unemployment numbers from early in the pandemic have subsided, [the Economic Policy Institute points out](#) that more than 25.7 million U.S. workers are still impacted by job loss or reduced hours. And of course, those hardest hit by these job losses are those who already had

the fewest resources. Wealth inequality has increased, while [Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, the Waltons, and others have reached previously unfathomable levels of wealth](#). The emergency relief bill that Congress passed at the end of 2020 is far short of what working people need to heal from COVID-19 and end the economic suffering the pandemic has unleashed.

## What the Working Class Needs

Before we limit our goals based on political realism, it's important to be clear about what the working class really needs. The first priority must be correcting the course of the economy. Any new stimulus program must provide funds to state and local governments to prevent mass layoffs and budgets cuts. Beyond that, we need a comprehensive jobs guarantee program geared towards meeting people's needs and addressing the threat of climate change and any future public health emergencies — a "Green New Deal." This will require massive investment in infrastructure, health-care and education. That investment should come with requirements that the jobs created be quality, union jobs, targeted toward the communities and populations that have suffered the most from deindustrialization, the climate crisis and systemic racism.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it starkly clear that the federal government must do more to provide healthcare for all, regardless of employment. To permanently fix our nation's broken healthcare system, we need the kind of Medicare for All, single-payer healthcare system that UE has supported since the 1940s.

Workers also need better rights to organize — our lives depend on it. [A recent study](#) found that unionized nursing homes in New York had 42% fewer COVID-19 infections and 30% fewer deaths than non-union nursing homes. Worker action has been crucial to winning personal protective equipment and safety policies across the country. This is taking place not only in UE and other union shops but also in unorganized workplaces. We need Congress to pass comprehensive labor law reform, such as the Workplace Democracy Act and the PRO Act, to give workers full rights to organize, bargain collectively, and strike.

## What We Can Expect

There are likely to be some pro-worker improvements out of this administration, especially in areas that they can link to controlling the pandemic.

Early among them ought to be an “Infectious Disease Standard” from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Such a rule would require healthcare facilities and potentially most other workplaces to proactively implement infectious disease control protocols. Organized labor also anticipates the reversal of unfavorable National Labor Relations Board rulings, and filling vacant OSHA investigator positions.

These measures, while helpful, only tinker around the edges of federal labor laws that favor employers, not workers, and are also antiquated under present working conditions. Simply reversing a number of bad rulings will not advance organized labor, which now represents fewer than 10% of U.S. workers. A Labor Secretary Walsh will not provide much inspiration.



Healthcare workers with Cook County Health picket outside of Stroger Hospital as they stage a one-day strike on December 22, 2020 in Chicago, Illinois. (Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)

Furthermore, Republican Senator Mitch McConnell’s success at packing federal courts with corporate-friendly judges will have a long-term impact on workers’ rights, regardless of Democratic control of the Senate. The labor movement will experience continued fallout from the Supreme Court’s decision to allow public sector workers to avoid paying union dues while benefiting from union negotiated contracts. Labor should be prepared for the possibility that the Court could expand that ruling into the private sector too.

Working people cannot rely on the courts to protect them. The judiciary has always prioritized protecting the institutions that preserve the status quo, from *Dred Scott* to new Supreme Court Justice [Amy Coney Barrett's Seventh Circuit rulings upholding racial discrimination at work](#), conceding new rights only when the public demands them.

Additionally, activists will need to be prepared to mobilize swiftly to prevent new trade deals that favor corporations. Biden was an architect of the ultimately failed Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), and he may try to revive it. That said, his nominee for U.S. Trade Representative, Katherine Tai, is a positive step. Tai led negotiations over NAFTA 2.0 for the Democratic majority in Congress. There she helped to strengthen provisions in the new agreement that protect Mexican workers' ability to form independent unions and negotiate for better pay and benefits. Improving the wages and working conditions for workers in other countries is the best way to prevent U.S. firms from moving production overseas and provide opportunities to reinvest in domestic manufacturing.

Tai's nomination demonstrates that the old "free trade" model, embodied by NAFTA, the World Trade Organization, and the proposed TPP, and embraced for decades by both Republicans and corporate Democrats, is no longer viable. However, it remains to be seen how much Tai, and the Biden administration, are committed to policies that raise the wages and working conditions of workers, especially manufacturing workers, in all countries. Those are the only kind of policies that will truly protect our jobs from globalization. Working people will still need to stay alert and be ready to keep the pressure on.

So far, Biden's choices for his Cabinet and advisors largely favor predictable corporate centrists and cronies from the Obama administration. Three of his picks are employees of BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager and proponent of corporate deregulation. His nominee for Defense Secretary is on the board of Raytheon, one of the world's largest weapons manufacturers. The working class should be suspicious of their warmongering.

However, a surprisingly positive counterpoint to these centrist voices is Deb Haaland, Biden's nominee for Secretary of the Interior. In addition to the significant impact of having a Native American woman lead the department that governs the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Haaland is from the working class and has been an outspoken activist both before and during her term as a Congresswoman.

Centrist Democrats, including Biden, have thus far remained unwilling to even consider the Green New Deal. Labor should seize any opportunity to enact GND's proposals, even in a piecemeal fashion, while recognizing that this approach alone will not achieve full climate or economic justice. With the Georgia Senate runoff races completed and a Democratic Senate confirmed, the Biden administration will have a brief two-year window to push forward bold proposals.

## How We Get What We Need

The dramatic economic downturn induced by the pandemic presents opportunities for the working class, but only if we are united enough to advance a plan that benefits the long-term interests of workers, not those of corporations. That can only be won through visible actions that disrupt business as usual — literally.

There is good reason to believe that popular support can be mobilized to pressure Biden and Congress, especially if labor takes a leading role and builds a broad coalition that includes Black Lives Matter and environmental activists. While Democrats were not particularly popular in the recent election, pro-worker policies were.

In Florida — where Trump did significantly better than in 2016 — a super-majority of voters passed an initiative to institute a \$15 minimum wage. The Labor Campaign for Single Payer said in an email sent to supporters that, "Even though the Democrats lost seats in Congress, not a single cosponsor of the Medicare for All Act was defeated. ... Even Medicare for All supporters in swing districts...were re-elected while swing district opponents went down in defeat."

Organized labor should be prepared to think and act creatively with the opportunities available to them. We've inherited a federal government decimated by underfunding and privatization. We can rebuild trust in our institutions by using them to put people to work building more resilient communities, and we should start where we find a friendly audience. For example, with Haaland as Interior Secretary, what kinds of green jobs programs could we create to enhance our natural resources, rather than exploit them? Perhaps she can shape a new Civilian Conservation Corps whose members replace lead water lines and remove coal ash, while earning a living wage.



Another possibility: the choice of Xavier Becerra for Secretary of Health and Human Services is odd, considering his lack of experience in public health. He has previously supported calls for Medicare for All, but has agreed to go along with Biden's desire not to advance that plan. Becerra's wife, Carolina Reyes, has made a career in advancing maternal medicine in medically underserved communities, and perhaps she can be a positive influence. As the U.S. struggles to control the pandemic and administer vaccines, labor should support a robust investment in the existing but underfunded National Health Service Corps, which is administered by the Department of Health and Human Services. Let's pay union wages to thousands of workers to be trained on testing and vaccination protocols and also pay for their future college education in the healthcare field.

We should also be prepared to advance bold proposals even where our allies are more limited. For example, UE Local 506 members make locomotive engines in Erie, Pennsylvania, earning solid wages and benefits through their years of union struggle. UE members there would love to be on the forefront of making electric locomotives powered by clean energy for a national high-speed railway. It is unclear whether Pete Buttigieg, Biden's nominee for Transportation Secretary, has the vision to advance a plan that could so positively impact many aspects of our economy and climate change, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't advocate for this ambitious idea.

Workers must make our struggles visible in the streets in order to push for the policies we need, using tactics such as mass marches, strikes, and civil disobedience, including occupations of workplaces. This will be the only way to compel capitalist structures to concede to our demands. Those parts of the labor movement that still know how to execute these actions should pass on their knowledge to a new generation of activists. Given recent events, such actions will need to be carefully organized to target capital's interests, not just create theater on Capitol Hill.

By focusing on issues that directly impact working people and their families, the labor movement can begin to heal divisions that have been amplified during the current administration. While Biden's victory is clear, Trump received tens of millions of working-class votes. As [UE's officers noted in a statement](#) following the January 6 insurrectionist violence at the capitol, "The growth of far-right and white-supremacist groups is not only a danger to our democracy, and to the lives and safety of people of color, it is also a roadblock to the working-class unity that we need to win economic justice and a decent standard of living." Neither the election results nor recent turmoil mean that either Biden or unions should pander

to Republicans. Rather, this increases the necessity of putting forward a bold program that will unite people around our common working-class interests.

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# Demand Everything: Joe Biden and the Portal to a Green New Deal

By Adrien Salazar



Taylor Schilling, Jane Fonda, Khadouna and Kyra Sedgwick demonstrate during "Fire Drill Friday" climate change protest on December 6, 2019 in Washington, DC. (Photo by John Lamparski/Getty Images)

## Ecological Justice or Death

At the end of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election season, Joe Biden released a series of ads showcasing stories of ordinary Americans confronting climate chaos -- of oyster fisherfolk in the Florida Keys whose [catches are at risk](#) from ocean acidification, of a beekeeper in Arizona whose bee colonies are [being threatened](#) by extreme heat, and of an entrepreneur [building a solar business](#) in Navajo country. In one clip that aired nationally, the campaign juxtaposed shots of relentless wildfires and [Melanie](#), a wildland firefighter from Phoenix, Arizona, saying, "People are continuing to die. You keep fighting a battle that doesn't end." She was right. With this series of advertisements, along with a steady drumbeat of climate policy promises, Joe Biden made climate action a closing bid of his race. He doubled down on the fact that a [majority of Americans](#) want to see the government act on climate. And he won.

This past year was not only marked by a pandemic but also by [relentless climate chaos](#). Skies over parts of the western U.S. turned a deep orange from the smoke of wildfires. Torrential rains and floods inundated Southeast Asia, East Africa, and the American Midwest. Hurricane after hurricane barraged the Gulf South and the Caribbean during a historic storm season. All of this occurred as COVID-19 gripped and decimated the world.

The pandemic cast a spotlight on the deep structural inequalities of society. In the U.S., [Black](#), [Indigenous](#), and [people of color populations](#) faced higher infection and mortality rates from COVID-19. Evidence now shows that exposure to pollution [increases risk](#) to the disease all over the world. As the economy has collapsed, it is mostly Black and brown [essential workers](#) and [women](#) in the service sectors who have kept society functioning while continually putting themselves [at risk](#). This year, the world witnessed the brutal force of emergency upon emergency aggravate centuries of racial violence and economic impoverishment.

However, there is a vision for rebuilding our economy and mobilizing every arm of government to address both the acute economic crisis caused by this pandemic and the long-term crises of climate emergency and inequality. This plan has many names -- a [green recovery](#), a [green stimulus](#), a [just recovery](#), or simply a Green New Deal. By whatever name, the idea is tantalizing: industrial-scale investments in the economy to expand livelihoods for people while transitioning to a low-carbon future. These economic investments, coupled with social investments, such as in housing and healthcare, build resilience to future disasters, even as we emerge out of this one. This vision is the beginning of a just response to climate chaos.

In his Presidential campaign, Biden [championed](#) elements of a Green New Deal in all but name, a [result of pressure](#) from climate advocates, led by young people and people of color who demanded political leadership confront climate reality. Now that the Senate is under Democratic control, climate justice activists retain a chance at winning significant climate legislation, potentially even the beginnings of a Green New Deal. But this is not guaranteed.

As Biden is inaugurated and a brand new Congress begins session, the *climate justice left*--the coalition of forces across environmental, social justice, and political movement sectors--will face the continued urgency of an inequitable climate crisis along with the reticence of neoliberal plutocrats who will insist on incrementalism.

The defeat of the climate-denier-in-chief has opened up a chance--slim as it may be--of survival against climate chaos. Biden's first months will determine just what the odds are. Movements can leverage even small concrete victories in this critical window to widen the possibility for wholesale economic and political transformation. For many communities failure in the next few years is not an option. In the words of Rosa Luxemburg, the world is at the crossroads of socialism or barbarism. And in the case of the climate crisis, it is ecological justice or death.

## The Specter of the Green New Deal

Through crisis, a vision of an irresistible future has haunted American and global politics: the specter of a Green New Deal. Through the efforts of young people, environmental justice leaders, grassroots organizations led by people of color, and a climate justice movement that increasingly moves in formation toward what [may be called](#) a *climate justice united front*, the Green New Deal has become a galvanizing vision and a litmus test for progressive political leadership. Grassroots organizing pushed and shifted the political landscape from a place where Democrats [had no clear plans](#) to address climate change, to climate policy standing at the core of a new governing agenda.

Despite conservatives [lambasting](#) the Green New Deal, voters are motivated by, and [still demand](#), bold climate action from political leaders. The idea that climate solutions can and must address intertwined economic and racial inequality has expanded the scope of possibility for climate policy to not just address emissions but to also be economically transformative, redistributive, and reparative.

Where beltway climate policy had been prescribed around carbon emissions reductions--a strategy that consistently [failed](#)--the Green New Deal binds together climate solutions, investments to create good jobs, and justice. This logic is rooted in the lived reality that every aspect of society is affected by a climate crisis intertwined with [white supremacy](#), [colonialism](#), and economic inequity. Thus solutions must be as concerned with restoring an equitable economy, achieving racial justice, and building social infrastructure as they are with the molecules of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

While some climate hawks initially balked at attaching various social policies like affordable housing development or investments in healthcare to climate policies, this was [the strength](#) of the Green New Deal vision.



Its expansiveness is what has made the idea irresistible. New political alignments have formed—for example, the [Green New Deal Network](#), which launched this month, is a coalition that includes groups like Sunrise Movement, Climate Justice Alliance, Indigenous Environmental Network, political organizations like Indivisible, People’s Action, Working Families, traditional environmental groups like Sierra Club and Greenpeace, and labor unions like SEIU International. The Green New Deal has gone global, influencing a vision for a [climate-forward Europe](#). And efforts to outline a [global Green New Deal](#) are underway.

The original New Deal was a response not only to the Great Depression but decades of militant [worker organizing](#). The years preceding the original New Deal saw millions of workers engage in massive strikes, including three city-wide general strikes in 1934 in Minneapolis, San Francisco, and Toledo, and historic sit-down strikes in Flint, Michigan in 1936 and 1937, opening a wave of further strikes across the country. Today we face a similar economic collapse and spiraling inequality, just as our social movements are activating people across the country for climate justice and in defense of Black Lives.

Movements today don’t yet have the same scale that militant social movements had at the turn of the last century, but this century’s movements for justice are building strength. In September 2019, millions participated in youth climate strikes in the U.S. And in the summer of 2020 Black Lives Matter protests swept the country, and then the world. Deep grassroots organizing in communities of color delivered the critical electoral victories of 2020. And the coalitions [winning](#) just and equitable climate solutions are [broad coalitions](#) aligned on climate, a vibrant economy, and justice. A key lesson from the original New Deal is that transformative solutions won’t happen by accident. They arise in response to massive action.

This year, massive climate action is more tangible than ever, just as the scientific window for climate action narrows. President Biden’s administration will face [scrutiny](#) and pressure to fulfill his promises to address the climate crisis. A Democratic trifecta in government means movements could pressure Congress to pass remarkable legislation. In this period, the climate justice left can create points of leverage, continue to contest for and wield power, and win victories that will have generational consequences. By leveraging even small policy wins, we may blow open the bounds of the politically possible toward the materially necessary. Climate justice advocates, coalitions, and organizers must leap at every chance to win in ways that further our movement’s infrastructure and power.

The climate policies we can win at this juncture will not be the full extent of a Green New Deal. Even a Green New Deal will not be enough to achieve our economy's transformation away from extractive, white supremacist, and colonial hegemony. Climate activists and policy wonks have generally united on climate and energy solutions' centrality to a Green New Deal's vision. However, the Green New Deal's transformative potential goes beyond climate and energy. A just and equitable transformation of our economy is about ensuring a good life for everyone, it is about expanding the social safety net, and it is about restoring our relationships with our environment.

As climate policy fights devolve into technocratic arguments around the minutiae of energy policy, let us cast a light on unattended spaces that also hold the potential for wins that could build political power. There lie possibilities to expand the Green New Deal's scope towards achieving ecological justice.

## The Road to Victory

Momentum is on the side of the climate justice movement. The political organizing of climate activists has produced, for example, the powerful narrative that Joe Biden has the [mandate](#) to implement climate solutions. In the year preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, the world witnessed millions of people take the streets to demand climate action. This was the latest manifestation of decades of environmental action. If Biden makes Rooseveltian moves, it will not be of his sole volition, but because of the movements that push him. Coalitions like [NY Renews](#) in New York, the [Gulf South for a Green New Deal](#), and the national [Green New Deal Network](#) are building a united front around a vision for a Green New Deal that could leverage significant political power from the local to the national level. The environmental justice movement now has [unprecedented access](#) to the White House and the ear of allies in Congress due to years of organizing.

While our movements will not win everything we want in 2021, we can leverage climate policy battles to fortify movement infrastructure and win bolder in the next fights. Georgia didn't turn blue overnight. Black women leaders built out an ecosystem that activated Black voters over years, eventually winning a political shift that may have saved us all from climate catastrophe. Building power means being able to contend for political power and developing political projects that articulate a vision for ecological justice. This year, and the years ahead, we must accelerate our organizing, be deliberate, aggressive, and even ruthless in seizing political

opportunities, and invest in movement infrastructure at every step of the way.

Second, the incoming administration appears truly receptive to progressive climate policy. However, if the pattern of history holds, whatever the Biden administration will propose to address the climate crisis will not be enough. While bold, Biden's climate platform does not represent the full breadth of what is possible in a Green New Deal. Even with a Democratic Congress, he will not achieve most of what he has promised in his first year due to conservatives, centrists, and corporate forces who will hamstring progressive ideas along the way. However, this administration is the only chance we have to advance Federal climate policy in the near term.



Demonstrators are seen near the US Capitol during "Fire Drill Friday" climate change protest on November 15, 2019 in Washington, DC. (Photo by John Lamparski/Getty Images)

Policy experts have consistently [held up](#) investments and standards as pathways to a renewable energy transition, and Biden's climate plans confer this. We have allies in Congress ready to introduce bold bills on electric vehicles, energy policy, and large-scale investment in renewables. To expand the scope of what is possible in this administration, we must fight for, win, and leverage what a Biden administration demonstrates receptivity towards. But we also must attach to the coattails of climate and energy policy, the rest of what makes a Green New Deal truly transformative, like land and agricultural policies, investments in the healthcare sector, and reparative and redistributive justice social policy. It is up to movements to attach transformative elements to the specter of the Green New Deal, so everyone knows exactly what we mean and what we demand to win.

Third, confrontations at the frontlines of fossil fuel extraction and climate disaster are producing untenable conflict. Battles such as those over pipelines like Keystone XL, the Dakota Access Pipeline, and Line 3 in Minnesota, led by Indigenous peoples on the ground, will escalate just as the Indigenous movement has won a critical ally in Deb Haaland in the administration. The pressure to stop fossil fuel extraction has been consistent over decades, resulting in large financial institutions around the globe divesting funds from the sector. Biden himself publicly committed to end fossil fuel leasing on public lands and end oil and gas subsidies. The channeling of the militant resistance at the frontlines of the climate crisis towards the Biden administration could accelerate a wind-down of fossil fuel production. The dismantling of fossil fuel hegemony via policies like ending extraction infrastructure and subsidies to the industry must be part of a comprehensive climate agenda.

Finally, such victories could provide unrecoverable blows to an industry already [facing collapse](#): Fossil fuel industry is facing volatile drops in oil and gas prices, the divestment movement's success at degrading the sector's moral authority, and the impacts of acute economic collapse resulting in [widespread bankruptcy](#) and oil majors [laying off](#) tens of thousands of workers. These are cracks in fossil fuel hegemony that the climate justice left must be ruthless in taking advantage of while taking care to support a just transition for fossil fuel workers affected by an already unstable sector.

The crises of this moment, caused in significant part by ecological disruption perpetrated by fossil capital, are now at the same time producing the opening for concrete victories that could be politically and economically transformative. The work at hand is to leverage the portals of this moment, win material victories, and shift the center of climate solutions ever closer toward ecological justice.

## Free the Land

For example, land and agriculture policy are arms of a Green New Deal that hold enormous potential for victory from the margins to the center. They are, in fact, critical to building power to win a Green New Deal. The climate justice left could build a coalition with food justice movements, small farmers and rural communities, Indigenous activists, and those fighting to protect ecosystems. Victory could look like land, agriculture, and conservation policy that is reparative to the historic displacement of Black and Indigenous communities and regenerative to the ecosystems that the state and corporations have destroyed.

An emboldened Secretary of the Interior in Deb Haaland could usher a historic wave of land management policy that invests in and protects public lands and respects Indigenous sovereignty. Her appointment to the Department of Interior could create a window for some of the most justice-oriented Green New Deal solutions to advance. Strengthening respect for indigenous sovereignty and engagement with Tribes regarding lands--an element included in the original Green New Deal resolution in Congress--would be a significant pivot from the settler land policies of the United States.

A radical reinvestment in public lands can transform the wider public's relationship to public goods and governance--we could fully fund the National Parks, and we could also demand a reinstatement of a [Civilian Conservation Corps](#) to support Black and brown young people's employment in STEM fields and conservation. Under Deb Haaland, the Interior could play a role in advancing "[land back](#)"--restoring lands to Native tribes and communities--via Tribal lands management arrangements, support for traditional conservation practices, and [rematriation](#) of lands to tribes.

The Justice for Black Farmers Act shows [what is possible](#) with reparative and regenerative agricultural policy. Introduced at the end of 2020, the law aims to facilitate the transfer of millions of acres of working lands back to Black farmers. Black farmers have lost over 90% of their land base in the last century due to the racist policies of agencies like the USDA. Getting these laws passed and implemented can pave the way for climate solutions that start to appear like models for reconciliation and reparations.

While opportunities like these arise, the climate justice left will also contend with the strictures of a neoliberal administration. Even under a Democratic trifecta, progressives will have to battle against centrist Democrats beholden to fossil fuel money. Simultaneously, as climate and Indigenous leaders have lauded Haaland's appointment, food and farm activists have derided Tom Vilsack's re-appointment to the post of Secretary of Agriculture. Vilsack is a friend of big agriculture, and under his former leadership, the USDA perpetrated some of its most [egregious and racist policies](#). Will he pivot in response to the times and invest in Black, brown, and small farmer communities, or will he repeat his past mistakes? Activists and advocates must change the political conditions, so leaders have no choice but to pivot towards the road to a Green New Deal. We must be relentless in our pursuit of victory, leveraging every chance to expand what is politically possible.



## **“What can we do today, so that tomorrow we can do what we are unable to do today?” - Paolo Freire**

At the dawn of 2021, climate justice and racial justice movements pose what may be the most revolutionary confrontations of our time. Movement organizations and coalitions are building political power--as victories in Georgia demonstrated. Against the centrist and neoliberal forces that will attempt to pivot the nation back to business-as-usual, our movements must secure every opening to advance the power of organized people and limit the power of organized capital. Democrats will not do what is necessary on their own. We must organize.

The fight to win climate investments and emissions targets are simply the tip of the spear of a Green New Deal. We must also leverage unforeseen openings--like those for redistributive land policy through an emboldened Department of Interior. At this moment, we may have a greater upper hand than we have ever had in our lifetimes. A modest group of young people sitting in Nancy Pelosi's office in 2018 threw the Green New Deal into the national spotlight, ultimately transforming the political promises of Presidential candidates and the now-President. Today we have stronger climate justice movement coalitions and organizing infrastructure aligned on a vision of climate justice.

We have a chance to advance solutions that will build organizing power, and we must take it. Even if the Biden administration fails on its boldest promises, our work is to leverage near-term fights to seed openings for irresistible political victory in the next battle. No piece of the ecological justice agenda is too small to organize and build power through.

In 2018 the Green New Deal was a wonky idea that no one had heard of. Today it is an idea whose time has come. The specter of the Green New Deal haunts conservatives and neoliberal centrists alike. It may be the most powerful tool we have at our disposal for standing up against climate chaos. But like the idea of a New Deal that preceded it in a previous time of global crisis, alone, it is just a vision. It is up to movements to demand and win the full scope of what we need. This year we will lay the groundwork for what will be possible for the next four years and the generation to come. We can not let any opening to expand the popularity and scope of our vision for a better world slip by.

Can we imagine and operate as if this year and a Biden Presidency were a portal to the next world? We must organize, fortify movement infrastructure, test-balloon progressive and bold eco-socialist ideas, and begin to dismantle the power of our enemies. We may be in the Decade of a Green New Deal, but it will not arrive by accident. The Green New Deal is an opening. It is only the beginning of what we need. We must be ruthless in wrestling every victory because with this presidency, we have just barely retained a chance at survival.

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# How to Design and Pay for a Green New Deal

## By Fadhel Kaboub



Newly redesigned \$100 notes are printed at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing on May 20, 2013 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Mark Wilson/Getty Images)

## Modern Monetary Theory Insights for the Biden Administration

The pandemic-induced economic crisis in the United States has already exposed a wide range of serious deficiencies in healthcare, broadband infrastructure, and affordable housing, along with a dysfunctional unemployment insurance system, unsustainable levels of consumer debt (student loans, medical debt, credit card debt), fragile supply chain systems, and fractured social safety nets. In this moment, the most urgent government action must be focused on economic relief for people who are unemployed because of the pandemic and who cannot pay their rent or mortgage, their bills, put food on the table, or in many cases cannot afford medical services after losing their employer-provided health insurance.

The good news is that it appears that there is a genuine acknowledgement by the political establishment that more economic relief is needed. They

have come to recognize the need for more in addition to the [CARES Act](#) that was signed into law in March 2020 (\$2.2 trillion) and the most recent [Pandemic Relief Bill](#) (\$900 billion), which was introduced in December 2020. It is likely that the Biden administration will boost economic relief while it attempts the herculean task of distributing [100 million COVID-19 vaccine doses](#) in the first 100 days of the Biden-Harris administration. However, all of this is simply temporary relief that keeps the economy from slipping into a Great Depression. What it does not do is constitute any structural remedy to the deeper socio-economic and ecological problems that we face. For that we must look elsewhere.

## PayGo Must Go

The Biden administration has signaled it is going to push for significant investments in infrastructure, renewable energy, and even some student debt relief, in addition to restoring more rigorous environmental and financial regulations. However, it is unlikely that this administration will be radically different from the Obama administration when it comes to [long-term concerns about government deficits and the national debt](#). Despite having won a simple majority control over the House and the Senate, Democrats have many fiscally conservative members in Congress such as the mini factions of [Blue Dog Coalition](#) and the [New Democrat Coalition](#) who fundamentally oppose large increases in fiscal deficits.

One of the major self-imposed fiscal constraints that Democrats have adopted in recent years is the so-called PayGo (or Pay-as-you-go) rule, which requires that any new spending be offset either by new taxes or by other budget cuts. Coincidentally, this is precisely one of the policy priorities of Republican members of the [Tea Party Movement](#) (Tea as in “taxed enough already!”). Therefore, PayGo constitutes the single most significant obstacle facing the progressive agenda in the United States. Thankfully, [the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress has introduced new revisions this year that will exempt pandemic-related economic and health relief, as well as policies to combat climate change from PayGo rules](#). This is a slight improvement, but it is not sufficient given that other social spending programs will continue to face the same (if not more) constraints.

It is likely that the COVID-19 economic recovery will be just as slow and painful as the post-2008 recovery, unless we are able to supplement economic relief spending with a comprehensive socio-ecological and economic transformation plan like the Green New Deal.

Unfortunately, the Green New Deal has been [vehemently opposed by Republicans as well as the so-called moderate Democrats](#) because of the claims that it is unrealistically ambitious, too expensive, and inflationary. Mainstream economic thinking will immediately validate such claims by linking larger budget deficits and a rising national debt to higher inflation rates, higher interest rates, declining private investment (crowding out effect), government insolvency, bankruptcy, currency depreciation, debt crisis, financial instability, and all around economic collapse.

## **Dangerously Misleading Fiscal Constraints**

The empirical reality of government deficits and debt over the last decade has essentially proven mainstream economics wrong. [Japan has a debt-to-GDP ratio of more than 260%](#) (one of the highest in the world), yet it is stuck in a [deflationary vicious cycle](#), has [negative interest rates](#), and shows no signs of government bankruptcy or insolvency despite having faced multiple [credit score downgrades by the major credit rating agencies](#).

The Fed has actually [admitted not having a reliable theory of inflation](#) (plain English translation: Fed actually does not know what causes inflation, yet somehow, mainstream economists are sure that a Green New Deal will be inflationary!). Keep in mind that the Fed and all major central banks have been targeting a 2% inflation rate for more than a decade now (Japan for three decades) and have used every trick in the textbook to escape the deflationary pressures without any success. Large deficits and rising national debt are not automatically inflationary and cannot automatically increase interest rates. In other words, mainstream economics is [theoretically flawed, empirically incoherent, ideologically biased towards austerity, morally bankrupt, and ecologically dangerous](#).

So are we doomed? Well, only if we continue to listen to mainstream economists who have been virtually wrong about everything that actually matters: [the climate crisis](#), [economic inequality](#), [financial crisis](#), [austerity](#), [unemployment](#), [inflation](#), [private sector debt](#), [racial wealth gap](#), and much more. But we have an opportunity for a paradigm shift in economic theory and in public policy. We can shift to a Green New Deal program and not worry about all of these faulty economic arguments again if we embrace Modern Monetary Theory (MMT).

## **The Urgency of a Green New Deal**



The 2019 [Green New Deal](#) resolution was put forward to address both the climate crisis as well as the inequality and socioeconomic exclusion crises in the United States. These crises cannot be addressed incrementally, but rather with *radical and intersectional* policies that address *the multidimensional roots of the problems* of ecological degradation, unemployment, poverty, inequality, racial injustice, and socio-economic exclusion. To paraphrase from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous 1963 speech "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," we have no time for the tranquilizing drug of gradualism and incrementalism. He was, of course, referring to the civil rights movement, but our context today not only deals with the existential climate crisis, but also [racial and economic inequities that remain deeply structural](#) to this day. Anything short of radical solutions (going to the roots) simply amounts to smokescreen policies that preserve the *status quo*.

The United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [report](#) gives us 10 years to act (not think, plan, or debate) on a massive scale to mobilize all of our resources to rapidly decarbonize the global economy in order to keep global warming below the 2°C limit above pre-industrial levels by the end of this century (ideally 1.5°C, but we are already on track to exceed that limit by mid-century). The IPCC report calls for a rapid mobilization and "acceleration of far-reaching, multilevel and cross-sectoral climate mitigation [...] by both incremental and transformational adaptation." That is what Martin Luther King Jr. would call "the fierce urgency of now." That is what a [Green New Deal ought to urgently deliver at the national level](#) and globally under a [Global Green New Deal](#) framework.

## Designing a Green New Deal

The Green New Deal framework is inspired by the original [New Deal program of the 1930s](#), which was a comprehensive economic development program funded by the federal government and locally implemented in every congressional district. A core feature of the Green New Deal framework is the [Job Guarantee program](#) (JG) which ensures living wage employment with a comprehensive benefits package to anyone who is ready, willing, and able to work.

A Green New Deal must be economically, socially, and ecologically restorative. It must also be comprehensive and permanent so that none of the existing socio-economic deficiencies are allowed to persist or to reemerge after the program is phased out. This is why the Job Guarantee program

is so important. [The JG](#) operates as a permanent buffer against economic fluctuations that typically hurt the most vulnerable members of society such as the long-term unemployed who tend to be the first to be fired during the recession, and last to be hired during the recovery. The long-term unemployed are often labeled by private sector employers as “unemployable.” They tend to be the most vulnerable in society: women, ethnic minorities, formerly incarcerated individuals, people with disabilities, and people with limited work experience, educational background, and vocational training.

[The Job Guarantee](#) program provides a public option in the labor market. It takes people as they are, where they are, and provides on-the-job paid training at a living wage with a broad and comprehensive benefits package that can include assistance with housing, mental health, legal aid, soft skills, family counseling, career counseling, recovery, and rehabilitation services. The goal is to avoid setting people up for failure by offering a job without providing the ecosystem of services that allows them to thrive.

## How to Pay for it?

The Green New Deal program is a [federally-funded, locally-administered](#) program. Therefore, no financial burden will be placed on local states and municipalities. The conventional wisdom on federal government spending says government spending is limited by the amount of tax revenues and by the willingness of private credit markets to lend to the government. Therefore, the conventional wisdom falsely assume that the federal government’s fiscal policy space is very limited.

However, Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) argues that the fiscal spending capacity of a country like the United States is much higher than what we think. The U.S. enjoys a high degree of monetary sovereignty because it issues its own fiat currency; only accepts its own currency in payment of taxes, and it doesn’t fix the value of its currency to gold, silver, or foreign currencies. MMT never claims that the spending capacity is unlimited.

Instead, MMT states that the real constraint that limits a country’s spending has to do with the risk of [inflation](#), which is determined by two factors: the availability of real resources (productive capacity) and the concentration of market power in the economy (abusive price-setting behavior).

The good news is that with adequate planning, strategic investments, and a coherent industrial policy, the U.S. can actually increase its fiscal

spending capacity because resources are producible. We can train workers, we can build more productive capacity, and we can acquire higher productivity rates over time. In other words, the first source of inflation risk can be dealt with and can in fact be a source of job creation, economic stability, and shared prosperity.

However, the second source of inflation risk cannot be dealt with by increasing or decreasing spending. Abusive price setting behavior takes place because some firms have excessive market power, so they can raise prices simply because they can, or because lawmakers let them. Think of the market power of Big Pharma, Big Oil, Big Tech, Wall Street, health insurance companies, and real estate companies in the United States.

This inflation risk can only be mitigated by taxing and regulating this corporate market power out of existence. In other words, lawmakers have the legal obligation to democratize those industries. Therefore, from an MMT perspective, the second source of inflation risk is a political economy question about the democratic process, corruption, and about corporate power and influence in politics.

## Modern Monetary Theory (MMT)

MMT economists have been very clear about [decoupling spending and taxation](#) at the federal level. We should spend on national priorities such as healthcare, education, green infrastructure, affordable housing, broadband, transportation, research and development of green technology, and more efficient renewable energy production and storage. [We should tax](#) polluters, financial speculators, abusive price setters, and ultra-rich oligarchs, not because the Federal government (sovereign issuer of the U.S. dollar) needs their money or their permission to launch a Green New Deal, but because we want to decarbonize the system, stabilize the economy, protect democracy from oligarchy, and establish a more sustainable, equitable, and just system.

Unfortunately, orthodox finance rhetoric continues to infiltrate the Green New Deal narrative. It is assumed that there is a limited pool of money at the government's disposal, so if the military takes some of it, there will be less available for other programs, unless we manage to tax the rich or oil companies to find the money we need for the Green New Deal. This '[tax-payer money](#)' and sound finance narrative is not only [factually incorrect](#) ([Federal spending is not financed via taxes and bonds](#)), but it is also [politically counterproductive](#), and rhetorically dangerous.

MMT reminds us that [the federal government \(currency issuer\) does not have the same financial constraints](#) as local state and municipal governments, households, and firms (currency users). The federal government only [faces real resource](#) (productive capacity) constraints. Local government debt, corporate debt, and household debt are real financial burdens that can only be discharged by spending less and/or bringing in more revenue. The federal government spends its own money into existence, [but it needs to tax](#) in order to create a demand for its currency and stabilize its value (among other social purposes). [The federal government does not need to borrow its own money from rich investors, foreign governments, or future generations.](#)

## How did the U.S. pay for World War II?

WWII came right after the Great Depression, which was the most miserable time in U.S. history. There was very little money to be taxed or borrowed during the Great Depression. Yet the U.S. managed a rapid mobilization to enter the war without having taxed or borrowed much at all. The question at the time was not about [“finding the money” to pay for the war](#), but [finding the real resources to mobilize for the war effort](#).

The sale of the war bonds took place during (not before) the war. War bonds leveraged the patriotic mood of the nation in a non-coercive way to convince workers to abstain from consumption during the war. Not buying new homes, cars, and other consumer goods allowed the U.S. to direct more material and labor resources towards the war effort. There were other policy tools including taxation as well as price controls and rationing of key commodities needed for the war. It is the real resources that matter. Money is simply a symbolic representation of the real economic activity that we can produce by mobilizing and organizing our productive capacity.

### How did we pay for the CARES Act?

In fact, the way we paid for WWII is the way the federal government always pays for its expenditures. How did we pay for the CARES act? Who did we tax? Who did we borrow from? For years, many people said there was no money for a Green New Deal, no money for Medicare for All, and no money for social and economic justice programs. Then all of a sudden a pandemic hits, and magically 535 elected officials gathered in the Capitol and voted [unanimously](#) to approve \$2.2 trillion in economic relief. A few days later, the president and treasury secretary announced that [“tax day”](#)

[\(April 15\) has been postponed to July 15<sup>th</sup>](#). In other words, the federal government did not need to borrow or tax anyone in order to respond to the pandemic. It was not about “finding the money.” It was simply about *finding the votes* in the House and Senate to make it happen.

Then the real work began. We needed to find hospital beds, ventilators, masks, gloves, hand sanitizer, doctors, nurses, medical technicians, scientists and lab researchers to produce vaccines and therapeutics to fight the coronavirus, and an entire logistical infrastructure to distribute the vaccines. These were the real resources needed to fight the pandemic. That is also how we are going to [mobilize resources](#) to make the [Green New Deal](#) a reality.

## The Biden-Harris Opportunity

It is abundantly clear that the Biden administration’s [nominees and appointees](#) will heavily mirror the political, economic, and ideological makeup of the Obama administration. We should expect a big spending push in the first few months of this new administration in order to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and attempt to put a dent in the economic crisis. [Biden has made it very clear that he is not going to worry about the deficit](#) or the national debt (for now), which is consistent with what [his economic advisors believe](#) (for now).

However, those same economic advisors will almost inevitably turn their attention to the deficit and the national debt, and they will be joined by a small army of Washington political commentators and policy wonks who will make the 2022 midterm elections all about fiscal responsibility. Why? Because it is very easy for the opposition party to make it a key campaign issue.

The [anti-MMT pump has already been primed by both establishment Democrats and Republicans who see it as a dangerous idea for the country](#). Therefore, the Biden administration will quickly face its biggest challenge yet, either reverse course and abide by status-quo neoliberal economic principles and [deficit hysteria](#) political strategies, or forge ahead with an MMT-informed economic, social, and ecological agenda to truly deliver on the “[Build Back Better](#)” campaign promises.

Now is the time to appeal to Biden’s common sense and sense of decency. When his economic advisors inevitably return to the [deficit and debt mania](#) (and they will), we need to focus our rhetoric on shifting the metrics towards the [deficits that matter](#) the most (healthcare deficits, educational



deficits, infrastructure deficits, jobs deficits, and [clean air, water, and soil](#) deficits), and the debts that matter the most (medical debt, student debt, and climate debt). These are the narratives that resonate. The [cost of in-action](#) is actually many times more expensive than the financial cost of the Green New Deal. Furthermore, the Green New Deal will accelerate the transition to an economy dominated by [greener jobs, which we already know are jobs that offer higher pay, are more resilient during recessions, recover at a much faster pace after a crisis, and are even safer during the pandemic](#).

In order for the Biden administration to deliver a stronger, more resilient, sustainable, just and prosperous economy, it must permanently abandon the deficit myths, focus on mobilizing real resources for a multipronged, bold, and transformative program like the Green New Deal. It must tax and regulate the abusive price-setting behavior of the most politically connected corporations. It must establish a 21<sup>st</sup> century [Pecora Commission to uproot corruption and restore a competitive economy, and a healthy democratic process](#). The 535 lawmakers we send to Washington to represent us must uphold the core values of a government of, by and for the People, rather than a government of, by, and for the SuperPACs and the corporate oligarchy. These are the real political constraints that suffocate the spending capacity of the federal government.

The Biden administration will have the opportunity to pilot a truly transformative economic development program in one of the most economically vulnerable (and politically important) regions of the country – Appalachia. [Relmagine Appalachia](#) is a blueprint for renewable energy transition, electric grid modernization, green manufacturing jobs, environmental conservation, regenerative agriculture, sustainable transportation, and broadband infrastructure in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and West Virginia. This plan has been [endorsed by more than 100 organizations](#) in the region, and has the support of labor unions, NGOs, think tanks, small town mayors, and elected officials. It simply awaits funding from the federal government. Relmagine Appalachia can be launched this year and scaled into a national program in 2022.

Biden can set a higher standard for future administrations, but it will take a tremendous amount of political courage, perseverance, and persuasion. But we have to remember what FDR said “I agree with you. I want to do it. Now, go out and make me do it.” It’s not enough to convince Biden. We have to continue building the popular support for an MMT-informed grassroots movement for a Green New Deal.

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# Hopes for New Beginnings on U.S. Trade Policy

By Karen Hansen Kuhn



Activists hold signs during a news conference in front of the U.S. Capitol June 25, 2019 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images)

2020 was a catastrophic year in many ways, especially regarding the pandemic, but it didn't come out of nowhere. In the United States, it reflected, and was worsened by, President Donald Trump. That ugly political situation, in turn, resulted from years of failed economic, social and climate policies that increased inequality and corporate power. Bernie Sanders put it well in his recent interview with [The Nation](#), "We have gotten a reprieve. Democracy has gotten a reprieve with Biden's victory. That's all it is. We did not win a rejection of what Trump stands for. We have got to ask ourselves, 'Why are we at a place where democracy is now so very threatened, and what do we do about it?' That is the question that every American should be discussing."

Trade policy is a good example of that need for real change. Since the start of the Generalized Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) in 1947, trade agreements have evolved from basic rules intended to prevent conflicts. Now they are comprehensive and binding agreements designed to facilitate flows of goods, services and investment no matter what the cost to local economies, public health or our environments.

Since the early 1990s with the formation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the spread of bilateral and regional agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) this process has accelerated. In developing countries, those agreements locked in the trade liberalization and economic austerity programs imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund starting in the 1980s. In the United States, free trade agreements exposed the lack of any coherent industrial policy. They did so by codifying a series of changes that eviscerated manufacturing jobs and family farms while undermining local efforts to set higher human rights or public interest standards. In 2016, part of Trump's base, especially in the areas of the country that had been decimated by these free-trade agreements, gravitated toward him because his populist messaging against NAFTA and other trade deals.

Many of Trump's erratic tariff actions disrupted markets and livelihoods, but they reflected that frustration with the mainstream consensus on trade. President Obama's administration promoted the expansion of a 1990s free-trade model in the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). The Obama administration did little to defend popular programs like Country of Origin Labeling for meat or local content requirements for renewable energy from challenges at the WTO. For decades, both Republican and Democratic administrations had embraced investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) in trade agreements, a mechanism that empowers corporations to sue governments over public interest laws overriding domestic sovereignty. ISDS came to symbolize to the public the drastic overreach of trade agreements into democratic decision making. ISDS was phased out between Canada and the United States and limited with Mexico in the renegotiated NAFTA agreement, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). After negotiations with Democratic majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, the ability of labor unions to challenge abuses was expanded in the final agreement. The shaky consensus on what belongs in trade agreements had cracked.

On the other hand, under Trump, new ways to let corporations overrule the public interest emerged. The renegotiated NAFTA includes a new chapter on "[Good Regulatory Practices](#)" that expands the ability of corporate stakeholders to delay and weaken public interest rules that might interfere with their profits. It includes a new chapter on digital rights that locks in current U.S. rules just as the public and Congress are starting to grapple with the need to tighten the regulation of the companies that control data. The USMCA also continued the attack on Canada's dairy supply

management program despite the growing public demand to limit overproduction and waste, while ensuring fair prices to allow farmers to produce healthy foods more sustainably. Furthermore, the Trump Administration did nothing to improve transparency in the trade negotiation process, and the actual content of current trade negotiations is still secret. Nonetheless, it is entirely probable that these insidious provisions are also included in the agreements that the U.S. is negotiating with the U.K. and Kenya.

## Learning from mistakes

President-elect Joe Biden is weighing his options on trade policy. He has stated that his first priorities will be to address the COVID-19 pandemic and start to rebuild the fragile U.S. economy. He is facing pressure from free traders in both parties who are eager to get back to business as usual. But it is a positive sign that he has pledged not to jump into any new trade deals. In a December interview with the [New York Times](#), Biden affirmed his campaign promise for a moratorium on new trade deals, saying “I’m not going to enter any new trade agreement with anybody until we have made major investments here at home and in our workers.”

Those investments, including his pledge to expand Buy America programs to help promote a green economy, could run into conflict with existing trade commitments. In 2019, a WTO [dispute panel ruled](#) that renewable energy policies that supported local green jobs in eight U.S. states violated international trade rules. The case was brought by India against policies promoting renewable energy that included preferences or incentives for “local content,” meaning that some aspect of the energy or fuel must be produced in that state to gain the preference.

What’s significant here is not only the outcome, but also the reasons the dispute emerged. IATP’s Ben Lilliston commented on the ways [short-sighted export promotion can undercut job creation and climate solutions](#) in the U.S. and abroad. India brought the case in response to an Obama administration challenge at the WTO to India’s solar program that was decided in favor of the U.S. in 2016. India’s program gave preferences to local solar panel companies and was touted as a green jobs program and a vital part of the country’s Paris Climate Agreement commitment. The U.S. argued that India’s policy discriminated against U.S. solar panel manufacturers interested in export opportunities. Biden should stop taking aim at other countries’ efforts to build greener economies. Trade rules should provide protection from public interest harms but not quash initiatives needed to



satisfy local preferences and environmental imperatives. In order to meet our global climate challenge, this point is imperative.

Biden could also direct both his agriculture and trade teams to learn from Canada's successful experience with supply management for dairy production. That program has been an inspiration for U.S. dairy farmers confronting unstable markets, overproduction and low prices. President Trump complained about the unfairness of Canada's protection of its dairy market and called for it to be abolished. [Tom Vilsack](#) said as much in the past. Vilsack, the former Obama-era head of the Department of Agriculture, and most recently a lobbyist for big agriculture, is Biden's controversial nominee for Secretary of Agriculture. Rather than joining demands to open up Canada's markets, the [Wisconsin Farmers Union](#), [National Family Farm Coalition](#) and the [International Brotherhood of Teamsters](#), among others, have pointed out that not only is the entire Canadian market too small to make any real difference in the crisis confronting U.S. dairy farmers, but, more fundamentally, that the U.S. should instead learn from the Canadian experience to curb oversupply and low producer prices in the U.S.

## Ongoing Deals

It's not clear yet if the announced pause on new trade agreements includes the U.S.-U.K. deal, which by some reports is close to completion, or the U.S.-Kenya FTA, which is also under negotiation but appears to be at an earlier stage. A comprehensive moratorium on trade agreements could create space to reassess the goals for international trade. The multisectoral U.S. [Citizens Trade Campaign](#) urges Biden to "Firmly reject the failed trade model of the past by halting Trump-era trade negotiations with Kenya, the United Kingdom and within the World Trade Organization; prioritizing the creation of a new model of trade agreements in partnership with Congress and civil society organizations; and renegotiating existing trade agreements to conform with that new model."

Moving forward with negotiations on either of these agreements absent a complete rethinking of trade policy and goals would be a huge mistake. There has been little public debate in the U.S. on the proposed trade deal with the U.K., but it could have profound implications now that the U.K. is outside the European Union. Writing about a [joint submission with the U.K. network Sustain](#) to the House of Lords, IATP senior attorney Sharon Treat, commented that, "One consequence of the U.K. leaving the EU and its Common Agricultural Policy is that the country has the opportunity to establish its own agricultural policies and farm support schemes. If the

U.K. and U.S. agree to a low-standard trade deal, the U.S. will effectively further embed industrialized, climate-harming agriculture well into the future, while the U.K. will accelerate its adoption of those same destructive practices and miss out on an opportunity to chart a different, more sustainable future.”



An American flag flies nearby with shipping containers stacked at the Port of Los Angeles in the background, which is the nation’s busiest container port, on November 7, 2019 in San Pedro, California. (Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images)

Similarly, the proposed U.S.-Kenya deal could undermine regional integration, now proceeding under the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement. The proposed deal would lock Kenya into deregulatory policies that undermine current and future regulations. For instance, U.S. biotech firms have pushed USTR to take aim at Kenya’s legislation restricting the use of GMOs and harmful pesticides. [Greenpeace uncovered pressure in the trade talks](#) to weaken Kenya’s adherence to the new protocol to the Basel Convention on toxic wastes. [Rep. Earl Blumenauer](#), chair of the House Ways and Means Trade Subcommittee, warned, “What they are trying to do is not good policy for Kenya or for the United States and it’s an example of where trade agreements need to be more transparent.”

The Kenya agreement also has broader implications for regional integration in Africa. The Trump administration clearly stated its intention to base this agreement on the new NAFTA, and to [make that the pattern for future trade agreements across the African continent](#). Kenya already has substantial access to the U.S. market for its exports, primarily textiles, coffee and

other agricultural goods. The Biden-Harris campaign [platform](#) includes a renewed commitment to U.S.-Africa relations based on mutually respectful engagement. An early decision by the Biden administration to halt the bilateral talks and open discussions with African nations and civil society on the elements of a different relationship on trade and development would be an important first step toward that goal.

## **Finding allies on the trade and climate conundrum**

Biden has pledged that the U.S. will rejoin the Paris Climate Accords. That is an important step, but in recent years, trade policy has been an impediment to progress on climate change. ISDS challenges have been lodged [against dozens of efforts around the world to rein in fossil fuels](#), including a \$15 billion lawsuit brought by TransCanada against the U.S. for its rejection of the Keystone pipeline (which was resolved when Trump agreed both to move forward with the pipeline and to refrain from requiring that the construction create U.S. jobs). Citizens Trade Campaign insists that Biden, “Defend a livable future and create green jobs by prioritizing climate action in trade policy, including through the adoption and enforcement of strong, cross-border climate standards and an end to investor-state dispute settlement.”

Meaningful progress to confront the climate crisis will require difficult decisions about the terms of global trade. In addition to removing obstacles like ISDS from bilateral and regional agreements, and negotiating space in WTO rules for local job creation in renewable energy programs, there are questions about how to manage trade when countries are at different stages of a transition to cleaner production. The [European Union](#) is already considering the use of a Carbon Border Adjustment Measure (CBAM), which would tax carbon-intensive goods at the border to reduce the temptation to avoid stringent environmental standards through imports and to ensure local businesses can compete while lowering their emissions. The idea behind CBAM is both to discourage offshoring of polluting industries and to encourage cleaner domestic production. The initial proposals cover steel, cement and coal, but there are proposals to extend those rules to other products, potentially including meat and other agricultural goods. [Biden’s campaign proposals](#) include similar measures for a carbon tariff. Even beyond the difficult technical issues around how to measure and compare emissions (and at which stage of production), the unilateral imposition of a carbon border measure raises fundamental questions of

fairness. This becomes even clearer in the absence of adequate funding or technology transfer for developing countries to make transitions to cleaner production methods while also bolstering their local economies. This too will require honest, respectful conversations with other countries about the best ways to achieve those goals.

Biden has clearly stated his intention to return to multilateralism, to rebuild ties with allies around the world. Much of that will undoubtedly involve talks with those allies on the best way to reengage with China. The WTO is at an impasse, both because of the Trump administration's refusal to name jurists to the WTO's dispute resolution mechanism and because of political resistance among many WTO members to the overreach of international trade rules into finance, services, agriculture and other sectors. This too will require an admission that the idea of business as usual is exactly the wrong idea for this moment. It will require learning from innovative local and national solutions to pressing world problems and considering how those solutions could actually be supported by trade policy.

And perhaps that's the fundamental issue. Biden has said the U.S. should lead, but really, it should learn to listen.

*Karen Hansen-Kuhn is program director at IATP. She leads IATP's work on trade policy and ensures synergies among our programs on trade, farm systems and climate and economic justice.*



# More Military Money, More Problems

By Ashik Siddique



Yemeni women donate money to support military and popular committee forces fight against the forces of the international recognized government backed by the Saudi-led coalition during a protest held against the Saudi-led coalition on November 10, 2018 in Sana'a, Yemen. (Mohammed Hamoud/Getty Images)

For decades in the United States, the military budget has been sacred for both parties: nothing gets in the way of maintaining U.S. hegemony. While bitter debate may erupt over other forms of federal spending, and any other bill runs the risk of becoming a political football, the annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) is usually a drama-free display of bipartisanship followed by a Presidential rubber-stamp.

2020 was different. In the last month of a most atypical year, amid a second spike in the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the aftermath of widespread uprisings for racial justice, President Trump [vetoed the NDAA](#) for reasons that were baldly racist. He objected to a symbolic gesture that would rename military bases with Confederate names, and self-servingly, insisted on a provision that would remove legal protections for tech companies from liability over content posted by users on their platforms, so they can no longer censor posts they don't like—like his own.



For very different reasons, a bipartisan minority of senators led by Senators Bernie Sanders then threatened to hold up the NDAA veto override as collateral in the fight to [force a vote](#) on \$2,000 stimulus checks to the public. Ultimately, both measures were defeated on New Year's Day by large majorities in the House and Senate. The Pentagon got its \$740 billion budget, and the public missed maximal economic relief amid the ongoing spike in COVID-19 cases.

The NDAA has only been vetoed by a President [five times](#) since the first one in 1961, most of them easily resolved quibbles over how particular assets were allocated. The last time was in 2015, when President Barack Obama [vetoed the bill](#) in order to lift spending caps on both military and non-military spending, against Republican efforts to only do the former—and [his rhetoric](#) was very much in terms of properly funding the military. One upshot of Trump's veto is that the military budget is finally being politicized, after many years of stultifying consensus that rendered it untouchable against even symbolic objections. These maneuvers failed this time against bipartisan majorities, but perhaps a process has finally begun of treating the NDAA like any other bill, not a sacred object that must pass at literally any cost.

In microcosm, these two fleeting efforts to stall Pentagon funding reflect alternate tendencies through the Trump years to reckon with a thoroughly, unsustainably militarized global order. On the right, the neoconservative consensus has grown into a reactionary desire to revitalize the racism and exclusionary violence that has been subdued in recent decades but is foundational to the United States, and on the left the progressive movement is fighting to redistribute the vastly unequal wealth within this nation to serve the public good.

With these two diverging paths, the danger is that Biden simply attempts a return to a pre-Trump status quo or—to “build back better” without thoroughly re-evaluating U.S. military policy. But that status quo is what led to Trump and can't last in an era of ongoing, intensifying crises that demand fundamental shifts in federal budget priorities.

Therefore, an organized left must take stock of strategic cleavages to push for military spending cuts in the near term, and lay the groundwork for major long-term transformation of U.S. policies away from militarism and imperial domination of the rest of the world, and toward social and ecological repair.

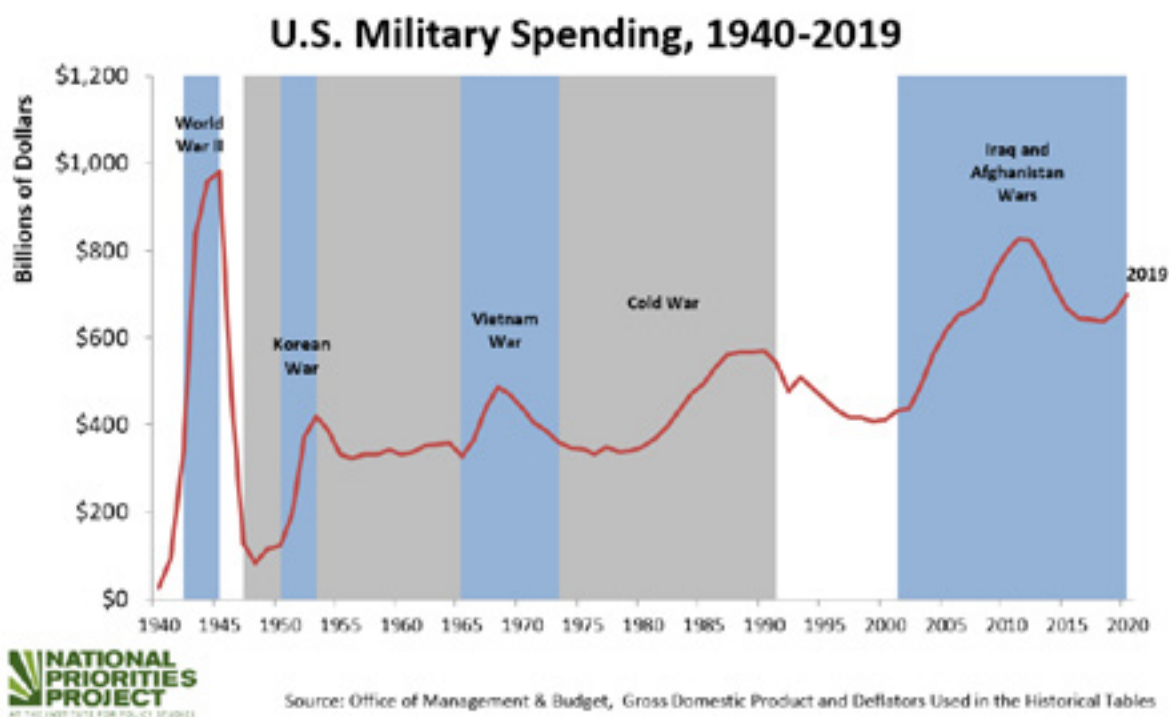
## Mask Off for the Empire

Rhetorically, Trump confounded many bipartisan norms on military policy, speaking and behaving in contradictory ways. On the 2016 campaign trail, he named the Iraq invasion as “the single worst decision ever made.” and repeatedly [criticized](#) George W. Bush for botching the war. He infamously [mocked](#) the military service of the late Sen. John McCain, and is since alleged to have frequently [disrespected](#) rank-and-file soldiers as “losers” and “suckers.” Yet, through it all he maintained [intense popularity](#) among a consistent 40% of the eligible voting population even through the 2020 election.

Trump campaigned in 2016 with a mixed message of criticizing US military adventurism, and moved to withdraw troops stationed in [Africa](#), the [Middle East](#), and [Germany](#) — often against bipartisan opposition in Congress. But he never really intended to end the wars. When he talked about ending the wars, he usually meant ending risk to American lives. His “America First” rhetoric wasn’t just skeptical of foreign involvement — it was openly contemptuous of the lives of people from what he allegedly called “shithole countries” of the Global South. Trump launched and celebrated spectacularly belligerent displays of U.S. violence: He authorized [troop surges](#) in Iraq, escalated massive [drone strikes](#) in Somalia, gleefully dropped the “[mother of all bombs](#)” in Afghanistan, and assassinated Iran’s major general Qassim Suleimani in an unprovoked attack, recklessly bringing the U.S. to the [brink of war](#) against Iran in early 2020. When confronted about his relationship with a “killer” autocrat like Putin, Trump [infamously answered](#): “We got a lot of killers. What, you think our country is so innocent?”

But previous administrations’ military policies weren’t so substantively different from Trump’s. Yes, Trump more openly aligned with right-wing authoritarian leaders like Modi in India and Netanyahu in Israel, but this just made more explicit the [long-established tradition](#) of U.S. relationships with [oppressive regimes](#) like Saudi Arabia when convenient for business, especially weapons sales. Trump made explicit what has long been masked by the political class across parties: U.S. military actions often function to enforce the [smooth functioning](#) of U.S.-dominated global capitalism. This happens at the expense of the self-determination of [people around the world](#) who are subjected to a [basically colonial](#) relationship to multinational [corporations](#) that profit from exploiting their resources and labor. [War itself is an industry](#), with private contractors [profiteering](#) from each new line item for “defense” in the federal budget.

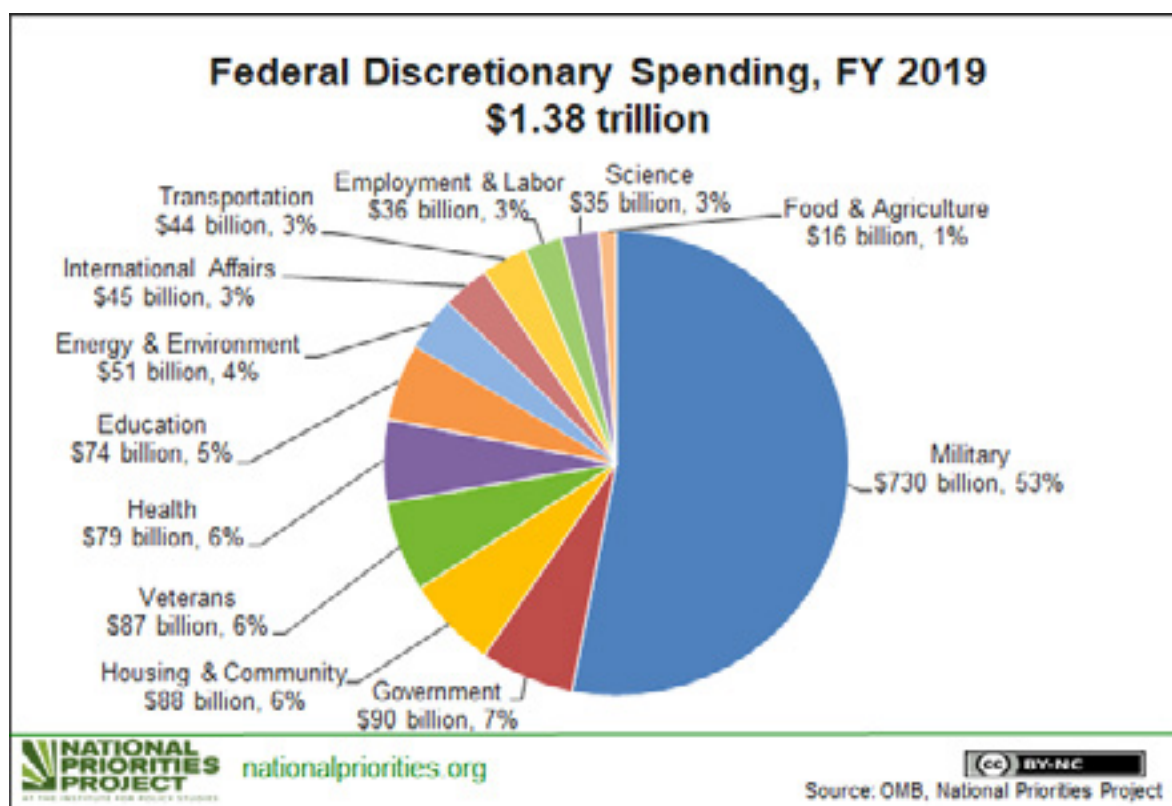
Trump's rhetoric was openly [imperialist](#) about taking other countries' [re-sources by force](#). His administration oversaw massive jumps in Pentagon spending in every year of his presidency, increasing almost \$100 billion from when he took office in 2017 to when he left four years later. Even while denouncing Trump's recklessness, most Democrats in Congress voted for these increases to the military budget each year.



Adjusted for inflation, the current military budget of \$740 billion for 2021 is more than at any point in U.S. history since World War II, except at the peak of the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such an enormous amount is more than the [next 10 highest-spending nations combined](#), making up almost 40% of the entire planet's military spending. [53% of the discretionary budget](#) allocated by Congress every year—more than all government spending on public health, education, transportation, housing, and clean energy combined—is dedicated to this warmaking.

These trends largely predated Trump. Just about [half of the military budget](#) goes to private corporations like Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, who profiteer from lucrative contracts building the machinery of war, while [less than a quarter](#) goes to the troops in the form of pay, housing, and benefits. About [\\$150 billion](#) goes toward maintaining over 800 foreign military bases that inflame regional tensions enabling avoidable wars around the world. The endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are providing cover for a

[\\$70 billion bump](#) in Pentagon spending, only about half of which is used for those conflicts.



The human costs of all this are incalculable. [At least 800,000 people](#) have been killed by direct war violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and Pakistan, the vast majority of them civilians. Many more have died from the destruction of infrastructure like hospitals, and many more than that have been injured or disabled. And America's post-9/11 wars have driven [at least 37 million people](#) from their homes, creating the greatest human displacement since World War II—comparable to the entire population of Canada, or everyone living in the state of California, becoming refugees. In many ways, Trump has been an authentic expression of many decades of national spending priorities that privileged massive militarization of borders, police and entire societies around the planet, while facilitating [extreme upward transfer of wealth](#) to handfuls of billionaires.

## Back to Normal?

The incoming Biden administration has repeatedly indicated its desire for America to "[lead the democratic world](#)" again, promising a return to a

world order based on liberal interventionism, despite that [status quo being tenuous](#). It remains to be seen how Biden will break with Trump's decisions on military policy, or whether the transition is largely continuous. "Space Force," one of Trump's most outlandish ventures, appears [likely to stay](#). It was budgeted \$15 billion for this year— almost enough to [end homelessness](#) in the U.S.

Under Obama, the US spread its [officially acknowledged](#) wars to seven nations: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. The US actually had troops in combat to fight "terrorism" in at least 14 nations as of 2018, and is actively engaged in various kinds of ["counterterrorism" activity in 80 nations](#). Many of Biden's cabinet picks are Obama alumni, part of the democratic administrative state known collectively as The Blob, who are ready to pick up similar roles [where they left off](#) four years ago. Some of these people shaped the [most militaristic policies](#) of the Obama administration, like secretary of state nominee Tony Blinken with the disastrous intervention in Libya. However, in a difference from Trump, they may at least be compelled to end the disastrous [war in Yemen](#). Others secured notable successes, like deputy secretary of state nominee Wendy Sherman with the [Iran nuclear deal](#), which must be restored for any chance at repairing the havoc wreaked by Trump— [and then some](#). One of the most pressing questions of the transition is whether some of these former Obama officials will update their views in a post-Trump world.

Biden and close advisors send mixed signals about whether the military budget is likely to shrink or expand. Kathleen Hicks, nominated for deputy secretary of defense, [has considered](#) the possibility for long-term budget reductions by shifting military priorities to require fewer warships and nuclear weapons. Retired Gen. Lloyd Austin, Biden's pick for secretary of defense, hasn't said much publicly about policy preferences, but has been a paid board member of the weapons maker Raytheon, one of the top profiteers from Pentagon contracts. The [revolving door](#) with private contractors has long skewed military spending priorities, and indeed many of the Department of Defense (DoD) cabinet picks have direct [industry ties](#). Victoria Nuland, the particularly hawkish nominee for under secretary of state for political affairs, [has encouraged](#) "robust defense budgets" and new weapons systems to keep a military edge over Russia.

No matter how key decision-makers feel about it personally, forces within the national security establishment will continue to push reasons for military spending increases. The easiest path forward for administration officials will always be the one of higher spending.



# Great Powers Conflict

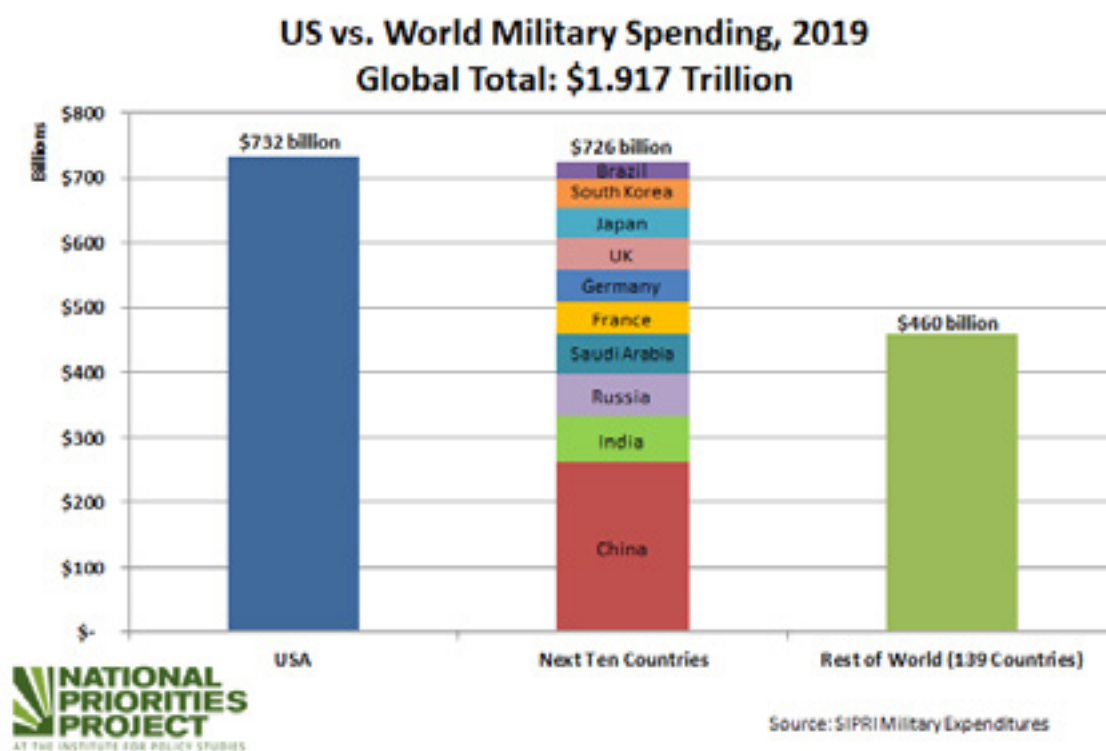
In late 2018, a report issued by the bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission called for Congress to approve annual increases of three to five percent in the Pentagon budget above inflation, which could yield [almost \\$1 trillion](#) in military spending by 2024. Among the stated reasons is the specter of a looming “national security emergency” that justifies huge military spending increases, perhaps related to the eruption of open war with China or Russia.

The bipartisan consensus around a militarized threat framing of “Great Powers” conflict, especially against China, has been in the works for many years, and especially intensified after China’s relatively quick economic recovery from the 2008 global financial crisis. The Obama administration began a “pivot to Asia” with a military buildup around the Pacific Ocean and South China Sea in efforts to contain China. That set the groundwork for Trump to further ratchet up tensions, which a [National Security Strategy memo](#) in 2017 explained was because of the return of “great power competition,” justifying US military growth.

[Anti-China rhetoric has now surpassed](#) the never-ending “War on Terror” as the driving force behind military budget increases from both sides of the aisle, which voted overwhelmingly for higher NDAA topline numbers every year Trump has been in office, and allocated billions specifically to the “Pacific Deterrence Initiative” this year. While Trump’s public statements have xenophobically weaponized the COVID-19 pandemic to [scapegoat China](#) for his administration’s own failure to manage a public health response, Biden [has at times reinforced](#) this kind of rhetoric as well. The new administration may be less belligerent, but all indications are that Biden’s military and foreign policy cabinet will reinforce the growing push for confrontation.

Top military officials describe China and Russia as “near-peer competitors” to the U.S. that must be confronted, but it’s important to emphasize just how much the U.S. outpaces any other nation with its military footprint. Annual Pentagon spending is almost triple China’s military budget, and over 10 times Russia’s. Compared to the U.S.’ more than [800 overseas military bases](#), Russia has [around 21](#). China only has [one overseas base](#), in Djibouti. Pentagon sources anxiously [speculate](#) that more Chinese overseas military bases are in the works, but even if this is true, the U.S. already has [29 bases in Africa](#) alone. Officials justify the U.S. AFRICOM presence largely to [compete](#) with the influence of Russia and China on

the continent, but there is little transparency about what role the U.S. military has really played there, and many indications that U.S. intervention is [failing to counter terrorism](#), and may in fact be [causing violence to spike](#). Whatever the perception of China's interests in projecting its power, it seems as if the military threat is severely overblown, and the U.S. response may be doing more harm than good.



## Securitizing the climate crisis

Another factor likely to drive requests for increased military funding is the push to frame the climate crisis as a matter of national security, articulated consistently by [John Kerry](#), President-elect Biden's nominee for special presidential envoy on climate. It is undoubtedly true that climate change is an immediate threat all over the world, and some regions are already much more vulnerable than others. Societies can be destabilized by climate impacts—the ongoing [conflict in Syria](#), exacerbated by severe drought, is one example.

Planners in the Pentagon have been internally considering the climate crisis through a securitized frame as early as 2004, viewing climate disasters as “[threat multipliers](#)” that ultimately demand a militarized “[armed lifeboat](#)” response to contain societal unrest. Longer-term analyses and scenario-planning in this vein become truly dystopian. A video used at

the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations University warns of the "unavoidable" need to prepare for "[hybrid threats](#)" in megacities all over the world like Lagos or Dhaka, which will require the U.S. military to engage in urban warfare against restive populations.

One [2019 analysis](#) from the U.S. Army War College warns that the U.S. military is "precariously underprepared" for escalating climate crisis, outlining possible [future sites of conflict](#) for a new era of endless war. Of course, the proposed solutions include increased funding for combat preparedness in an increasingly diverse and disturbing range of scenarios, like new interventions in highly populated climate-vulnerable nations at risk of mass migration, like Bangladesh. John Kerry's former think tank, the American Security Project, [lays out](#) a vision of militarizing a rapidly melting Arctic ocean to repel Russia— a long time obsession of "war gamers" who fear [Russia "winning" the climate crisis](#).

But why are armed conflict and military intervention a foregone conclusion, rather than pre-emptively building the infrastructure for a green economy that can mitigate future impacts of climate change, and developing much stronger global capacity for diplomacy and real humanitarian interventions? The [military itself is a huge polluter](#) — and is [often deployed](#) to sustain the fossil fuel industries that destabilize our climate. Simply positioning the Pentagon as a "[key player in the war on climate change](#)," as did military policy advisor Michele Flournoy, without fundamentally reconsidering the role the U.S. military plays in the world, risks ever more militarized quagmires intended as solutions to avoidable conflicts.

Instead of pouring ever more unaccountable resources into DoD agencies for "[greening the military](#)," while allowing the actual causes of climate change to intensify, governments could better use funds to address the root causes of climate crisis in ways aligned with a Green New Deal, which the public can appreciate and directly benefit from in their daily lives. Wealthy nations like the U.S. are [disproportionately responsible](#) for carbon emissions in the atmosphere that are causing the climate crisis, and possess the vast resources needed to adapt, due in part to the [ongoing legacy of colonial extraction](#) from societies around the world that are now most vulnerable to and least responsible for climate chaos. Sharing the resources needed to fund mitigation and adaptation efforts abroad is a matter of collective survival, and global justice. A fair share of global climate finance from the United States would approach [\\$680 billion](#), almost the size of the entire current military budget. And yet under President Barack Obama, U.S. commitments to the global [Green Climate Fund \(GCF\)](#) never exceeded a mere \$3 billion. Under Trump, the U.S. [withdrew](#) themselves completely

from the GCF. If the Biden administration is truly viewing the climate crisis for what it is—the greatest existential threat—then they should signal commitments to strengthening and reimagining the GCF instead of building out the military.

## Pandemic Profiteering

On the campaign trail in 2020, Biden promised to use the military's vast logistical capacity to help contain COVID-19—a reflexive assumption by many policymakers that the U.S. military is the best situated force to deal with any threat. Any notion that the Pentagon should be reliably tasked with pandemic relief should be dispelled by the reality of how its response played out. In the CARES Act, the Pentagon [took \\$1 billion dollars in COVID-19 relief funds](#) that were supposed to go towards making masks and equipment to protect workers from disease— and gave much of it to weapons manufacturers for jet engine parts and other war-making equipment irrelevant to the COVID crisis. Some parts of the military did step up with real support, but these were modest acts amid [shameless profiteering](#) from the military-industrial complex, which also lobbied for billions for unnecessary weapons systems from the COVID-19 bailout legislation. An institution designed for warfare is an [inefficient, expensive tool](#) to combat infectious diseases, as was already proven by the Obama administration's slow and costly militarized response to the Ebola outbreak in 2014. The COVID-19 pandemic has amply demonstrated that [civilians need to take control](#) of the military's resources—not the other way around. The entire budget for the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) for 2020 was [\\$7.7 billion](#) — the total military budget was 100 times larger. The best way to prepare for disease outbreaks, or any other kind of crisis, is not to keep haphazardly funneling resources to a bloated militarized bureaucracy that's not fit for purpose. The way is to actually fund societal needs like public health.

## Openings for the Left

Progressives should be clear-eyed about the incoming administration's stated priorities thus far. Status quo bias may be strong, especially for those who were also in the Obama administration. But this is a fundamentally different political landscape than in 2008. Perhaps Trump's poor management of the [administrative state](#), with many career officials quitting or leaving and never being replaced, [leaves more room](#) for movement rather than institutional inertia.

It's possible that Trump's presidency was [accidentally transformational](#) on economic policy, leaving both parties more interested in promoting demand through fiscal aid than policing budget deficits. In a post-COVID world, after multi-trillion-dollar stimulus bills with direct payments to the public, it may be increasingly untenable for politicians to explain that it is simply not possible to pay for nice things. Meanwhile, the Pentagon has [repeatedly](#) failed [comprehensive audits](#) in recent years, and meets no reasonable standard of fiscal responsibility.

One changing dynamic this year comes from the expiration of budget caps put in place by the [Budget Control Act of 2011](#), giving Congress a big opening to deeply shift priorities away from austerity and the Pentagon in a way that has not been on the table for many years. The arguments to [rein in military spending](#) seem increasingly clear, and Americans [tend to favor](#) reinvesting for urgent social needs.

## Where's Our Cut?

Last summer, progressives led a push to amend the NDAA with a [10% budget cut](#)—a breakthrough, since this was the first time in decades that Congress seriously considered shifting resources away from the Pentagon budget at all. The amendment failed, but just a few years ago it would have been hard to imagine even 40-50% of the Democratic Caucus in the House and Senate voting to cut the military budget, [as they did in 2020](#). That sets a baseline for a renewed fight this year.

Ten percent of the current budget is a whopping \$74 billion, which would be transformative for [any number of social priorities](#), like closing the public school racial funding gap, or creating one million green jobs that pay well enough to transition every fossil fuel worker. This is an exceedingly modest cut, putting Pentagon funds back within the inflation-adjusted range of levels at the end of the Obama administration. If the Biden team wants a return to “normal,” this is a minimal ask. A ten percent cut could easily be structured to crack down on [bureaucratic waste](#), or on war profiteering private contractors that deliver the lion's share of their [profits to CEOs](#), while scrapping [unnecessary weapons systems](#) and leaving untouched anything in the military budget that actually supports the troops, like employee pay and benefits. Finally ending the endless wars would save money—and moreover, the U.S. would stop killing so many people. When accounting for how to reduce military budgets, we must be sober in not shifting with an ever-increasing topline target. For example, advocating for 10% of an ever increasing pie risks losses greater than gains. Climate



activists recognize this, which is why [CO2 emissions targets](#) are tied to 1990 figures rather than later years. For a just reset in the longer term, it's useful to identify hard numbers for even larger reinvestments that could free up even more resources, and contextualize them with past military spending.

In 2019, the National Priorities Project and Poor People's Campaign proposed to safely [shift \\$350 billion](#) from the Pentagon budget, which would take it down to about \$400 billion per year, matching US military spending during much of the 1970s and 1990s. That would still leave the U.S. with a bigger budget than the militaries of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea combined. This would entail a fundamental reversal of the "War on Terror," and a retreat from the posture of "Great Powers" conflict, with a decisive end to unwinnable wars in the Middle East, closing 60% of all overseas bases (leaving merely 300+), [and more](#), opening space for a shift to real global diplomacy, cooperation, and solidarity.

In the wake of the storming of the U.S. Capitol by a mob of Trump supporters in the first week of this year, Biden and some Democrats [proposed new laws](#) against domestic terrorism, with increased funds to combat ideologically inspired violent extremists. This is a questionable prospect, judging from two decades of [stark results](#) of the post-9/11 creation and expansion of the Department of Homeland Security, with a [long trail of violent abuses](#) against the civil liberties of immigrants, racialized communities and political dissenters. In addition to 53% of the discretionary budget that goes to the military, another full 11% already goes to domestic militarized spending, including border enforcement, incarceration, and the war on drugs, which amounts to [almost two-thirds of the budget](#) allocated by Congress each year funding militarism. The last thing we need in response to right-wing polarization is an even more bloated security and surveillance apparatus—we need popular policies that actually meet people's material needs and expand democracy.

## Mass Organizing Against Militarism

Much more effective mass organizing is necessary to win such massive changes, and there are no shortcuts. The U.S. peace movement has played a crucial role in carrying the flame since the Vietnam War and nuclear disarmament movements through the 1980s. Amid the metastasis of the War on Terror, many peace groups have fallen into a mode of resisting wars reactively, following tactics fit for previous eras. The rise of dynamic intergenerational and multiracial leadership is an important step toward rebuilding the peace movement into a fighting force, and should be embraced.

Over the past decade, a generation of movement organizers has developed in the U.S. in successive waves of civil society politicization, through Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, immigrants rights, climate justice, and other struggles. A deep [generational disillusionment](#) with the military seems pervasive. Many young organizers draw natural intersectional connections from their main work to anti-militarism, without necessarily focusing most of their attention on it. New youth-led organizations like [Dissenters](#) are arising specifically to organize students to resist militarism and war. The rise in [police and prison abolition activism](#) is particularly fertile ground for making these connections. The past year's flurry of organizing to "[defund the police](#)" has radically shifted political terrain—perhaps "[defund the Pentagon](#)" isn't far behind.

In electoral politics, more outspoken progressives, particularly democratic socialist politicians like [Cori Bush](#), [Jamaal Bowman](#), and [Ilhan Omar](#) who are more willing to name and challenge the military-industrial complex, reflect the growing organization in the U.S. of young Black, Indigenous, and people of color who are descendants of immigrants from parts of the world that have directly experienced U.S. imperialism.

Activism against the military-industrial complex can [only go so far](#) without [the power of organized labor](#). The Pentagon is effectively this country's [largest jobs program](#), with well-paying unionized manufacturing jobs distributed across many working class communities given [few other options](#). In the 1990s, there was a national push for a "[peace dividend](#)" to shift resources away from the military after the Cold War, which had significant support from labor unions whose leaders pushed aggressively for military conversion planning and even Pentagon spending cuts. That kind of union support seems like a remote possibility now, with the labor movement [historically weak](#) and militarization so pervasive, but it's crucial to rebuild.

## Conclusion

During an unprecedented crisis, there are plenty of openings in the near term to make the political case for specific changes in U.S. budget priorities. The need to envision a coherent global order that makes real peace and justice possible, and build a solid power base within U.S. society to enact it in solidarity with people around the world, is more crucial than ever.

Biden talks a great deal about the need to restore the "[soul of the nation](#)." He, and anyone who agrees, would do well to heed the words of Martin

Luther King, Jr., in his famous [“Beyond Vietnam” speech](#): “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.” That was over 50 years ago. If the richest and most powerful nation in the world is to maintain any kind of integrity beyond the current political crises, it is well overdue for a revolution of values.

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# U.S.-China: Progressive Internationalist Strategy Under Biden

By Tobita Chow & Jake Werner



Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping accompanies U.S. Vice President Joe Biden to view an honor guard during a welcoming ceremony inside the Great Hall of the People on August 18, 2011 in Beijing, China. (Photo by Lintao Zhang/Getty Images)

The incoming Biden administration stands at a crossroads. Down one path lies intensifying great power conflict over zero-sum possibilities for growth in the global economy, increasingly venomous nationalism as the currency of political legitimacy, and ever stronger pressures to focus national wealth and talent on military power. Down the other path is an egalitarian global economy with opportunity for everyone, an effective and equitable response to the coronavirus pandemic, a globally just climate transition, and a new era of international peace built not on North–South inequality but dignity and inclusion.

The single most important factor deciding which path humanity will follow is the U.S.–China relationship: whether the world’s two most powerful countries devote their efforts to a destructive contest for supremacy or instead work together to reshape and renew the global system. Yet as

Biden's foreign policy appointees gaze upon the choice between great power conflict and multilateral cooperation, they seem to believe they can travel both paths at the same time.

The Biden administration thus presents difficult terrain for progressives. In contrast to right-wing forces, at least some parts of the Biden administration will share many of our goals. Yet most of those same people are committed to "competing" with China in ways that will actively undermine the conditions necessary to achieve progressive change. Understanding this challenge and formulating an effective strategy are urgent tasks for progressive politics.

## **The rise and fall of neoliberal US–China peace**

In the two decades leading up to the 2008 global financial crisis, the U.S. and China established a stable, symbiotic relationship founded on neoliberal patterns of growth and legitimacy. The neoliberal accommodation strongly served elite economic interests in both countries: Chinese businesses received investment, access to advanced technology, and a huge export market while American businesses exploited cheap factory labor and gained entry to the world's fastest growing market. Profit and corruption flourished as local and transnational capital collaborated to destroy the power of labor in both countries.

As earlier concentrations of production were abandoned, large rust belts emerged in the American Midwest and China's Northeast inhabited by workers left to fend for themselves on the margins of the economy.<sup>[1]</sup> In both countries, capital concentrated in major urban areas, creating a small number of high-paying professional jobs and a huge number of low-paying service jobs seeing to the needs of professionals. In China and the U.S. alike, these low-wage jobs were largely performed by vulnerable migrants. Yet the basis for U.S.–China accord was more than just the pecuniary gain of powerful people at the expense of the majority. Neoliberal ideology promised greater individual freedom, more and better consumer choices, plentiful job opportunities, greater respect for human rights and cultural difference, international peace, and cosmopolitan connectedness. In this period of engagement between the U.S. and China, those promises seemed to be making genuine progress.



All of that changed after 2008. The debt bubbles that had driven U.S. growth, Chinese exports, and Americans' sense that life was getting better in the absence of wage increases collapsed nearly overnight. Though China's enormous stimulus spending helped save the global economy as the rich countries turned to punishing austerity, it also pushed many U.S. businesses out of the China market while inflating huge debt bubbles in China that have been a source of intense anxiety for Chinese leaders ever since.<sup>[2]</sup>

The success of China's industrial policy together with its crisis-era stimulus spending and stagnation in the global economy led to enormous production overcapacity in sectors like steel, cement and shipbuilding, causing serious deflationary pressures worldwide. Overcapacity is as much the outcome of inadequate demand as of excess supply. Thus the neoliberal global economy's suppression of wages and consumer demand, and the persistent low rates of productivity growth in the market-driven investment system, were equally to blame. Yet American businesses and policymakers, unable to see beyond the low-wage labor regime and short-term investment patterns, blamed China for what were in fact problems with the whole system.

As the economic logic that had knit together China and the U.S. disintegrated, the cultural and ideological supports of neoliberal society were also crumbling. Popular antipathy targeted everything from multiculturalism to free trade, immigration to economic inequality, cosmopolitan culture to selfish individualism, sexual freedom to fragmented politics. Populism, nationalism, and egalitarianism suddenly emerged from the margins on both the left and the right and began to challenge mainstream politics.

Elites in the U.S. and China alike were profoundly shaken by the simultaneous decay of economic growth and political legitimacy. As they sought to adapt to the new environment of economic stagnation and reassert their authority over domestic discontent, each found themselves running up against the efforts of the other to survive under the new conditions. In both countries, vilifying the other became increasingly attractive to channel public anger into nationalism against a foreign threat, in hopes of imposing unity on the fractious population and mobilizing the nation for competition within the newly zero-sum global environment. Thus both sides have failed to address the root causes of economic and political turbulence and are instead only deepening the crisis.

# Contradictions in the Biden administration

The incoming Biden administration marks a clear break with the Trump approach to China, but a shared set of assumptions aligns the two on key issues. The Biden team's criticism of Trump has focused on three key themes: the damage done to traditional alliances and partnerships, the failure to win concessions on economic grievances despite an intense trade war, and the turning away from "American values" of democracy and human rights.

In other words, the Biden team broadly agrees with the aims of Trump's confrontation with China and is primarily concerned that the administration's tactics have been ineffective. Even the issue of "values" is best understood as a matter of efficacy: U.S. foreign policy thinkers apply their stated values selectively to put adversaries on the defensive and to firm up alliance ties with the richest countries.

The danger is that the Biden administration will, indeed, be more successful at mobilizing American society and U.S. allies against China. As the confrontation deepens, intensifying insecurity on both sides would become self-sustaining. In the process, it would increasingly divert attention away from the root problem—the zero-sum strictures of the global system—and instead focus efforts on defeating the other side. That could lead to a far more destructive confrontation than has Trump's disorganized bluster.

Based on statements both before and after the election by leading figures like Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser designee Jake Sullivan, the administration's early China initiatives can be divided among those that will reduce tensions in the short term; those that will quietly aggravate and deepen existing disputes, threatening a serious break in the relationship; and those that offer the possibility of a fundamentally different relationship, pointing in a progressive direction.

***Immediate improvements:*** Trump's 2018–2019 trade war may have drawn the most attention, but the administration's regulatory and military moves were more damaging to China. Such measures surged in 2020, when Trump's desperate search for a scapegoat to distract from his catastrophic mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic provided an opening within the administration for hawks to implement an even more aggressive agenda. Escalation grew throughout the year, including extraordinarily reckless anti-China rhetoric, multiple dangerous military provocations, a belligerent

diplomatic offensive in Asia, and increasingly damaging restrictions on Chinese companies and immigrants.

With the significant exception of measures against Chinese business, Biden will likely move quickly to dial back the more inflammatory policies. This will reduce the chances of a military conflict around Taiwan or the South China Sea. It will also slow, for the moment, the alarming build-up of popular nationalism in both countries. A more subdued diplomatic posture thus provides space for the assertion of a progressive alternative that was unthinkable when the Trump administration was setting fire to the relationship and Chinese leaders responded in kind. Yet this window of opportunity could be quite limited.

***Deepening antagonism:*** Biden's aspirations risk being seen as an existential threat by the Chinese leadership in both the economic and military realms. In an interview with Thomas Friedman after the election, Biden laid out his economic agenda: "to pursue trade policies that actually produce progress on China's abusive practices—that's stealing intellectual property, dumping products, illegal subsidies to corporations", and requiring "tech transfers" from U.S. to Chinese companies.<sup>[3]</sup>

In other words, Biden intends to pressure China into abandoning the industrial policy that has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty and allowed the country to escape perpetual subordination in the global economy.<sup>[4]</sup> He will pose these demands even as he himself has made an explicitly nationalist industrial policy the centerpiece of his own economic agenda.<sup>[5]</sup> If such an approach to China wins out, it will represent the triumph of corporate nationalism over the wellbeing of the working class in both the United States and China, undermining the prospect of democratic reforms in either country and of resolving the climate crisis.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Chinese leadership has some room to give ground. For example, now that China has significantly closed the gap with the rich countries in advanced technology and Chinese companies are beginning to produce their own innovations, Chinese policymakers are increasingly interested in I.P. protections.<sup>[7]</sup> But under the current conditions of the global economy, continued growth depends on breaking into fields like artificial intelligence or avionics that the US, Europe, and Japan still monopolize.

From China's perspective, Biden's aim of organizing a coalition of rich countries, most of which are former colonial powers, to preserve their monopoly on advanced production looks less like the defense of a "level playing field" or a "rules-based system" and more like a recrudescence

of imperialist aggression to keep China in its place. Since the continued vitality of the Chinese economy is necessary not only to avoid a sudden crash in China's financial markets but also to maintain social stability and the Communist Party's legitimacy, Chinese leaders perceive these moves as profoundly threatening.

Those threat perceptions are deepened by security conflicts. Although Biden is likely to tamp down military tensions in the short term, the U.S. and China jostling for hegemony in the South and East China Seas will continue and perhaps intensify. The situation around both North Korea and Taiwan is fragile, and either one could explode into the most dangerous crisis of the post-Cold War world if any of the relevant parties were to seriously challenge the status quo. U.S. leaders will—rightly, if hypocritically—continue to criticize abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, exacerbating Chinese leaders' longstanding fears about territorial integrity.<sup>[8]</sup>

Perhaps most ominously, elites in both the U.S. and China increasingly see the other country's success in non-military realms as a military threat to their own country. In an article written with neoconservative Hal Brands, Jake Sullivan cast China's efforts to shape "the world's economic rules, technology standards, and political institutions to its advantage and in its image" as "pursuing global dominance."<sup>[9]</sup>

In the end, simply lecturing the leaders of either country to stop being paranoid, to think of the greater good, to set aside conflicts and focus on shared interests, will be futile. The governing elites of the U.S. and China are now trapped in a zero-sum structure of competition. The longer the limited space in the global economy continues to push the two up against each other, the greater the risk that this "competition" will develop into a spiraling cycle of mutual insecurity and a self-sustaining escalation of nationalist hatred.

***Progressive possibilities:*** All is not yet lost. Despite the Biden team's commitment to corporate nationalism and U.S. hegemony, this administration will also be unusually open to a number of key progressive ideas on foreign policy. If progressive forces are able to push these ideas to realization and able to limit the damage done by nationalism and hegemony, the structural forces driving great power competition could be transformed and a path blazed to a far more egalitarian, inclusive, and democratic world.

Most significant, Biden has named John Kerry to a special position with responsibility for coordinating U.S. climate diplomacy. The move has

occasioned much hand-wringing within the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Many members of the so-called blob are concerned that Biden might prioritize an existential threat to humanity over their enthusiasm for great power conflict. Thomas Wright provides an overview of the dire prospects:

According to three people familiar with Kerry's thinking, Kerry believes that cooperation with China is the key to progress on climate change and that climate is by far the most important issue in the relationship between the United States and China. ... everything else, including geopolitical competition with China, is of secondary importance to this overarching threat.<sup>[10]</sup> Together with Biden's environmental team—the strongest on climate ever named—and the surprisingly forthright climate message Biden pursued during the election, there is reason to expect that the Biden administration will be particularly receptive to progressives on climate.<sup>[11]</sup>

The second key progressive opening is a profound change in economic thinking unfolding among Democrats. Biden and his top officials have rejected the free market as the privileged motor for allocating resources in the economy. Jake Sullivan has even criticized neoliberalism by name, arguing with Jennifer Harris that, for reasons of national security as much as domestic policy, the U.S. should prioritize public investment, pursue industrial policy to fight climate change, and only engage in trade agreements that “involve a laser focus on what improves wages and creates high-paying jobs in the United States, rather than making the world safe for corporate investment.”<sup>[12]</sup>

Prioritizing climate and labor over the free market and corporate power are essential preconditions for achieving progressive globalization. Yet, even here, the Biden team is torn in two directions. On the one hand, they recognize that the wars and inequalities of the neoliberal globalization era have lost all popular support. According to a report that Sullivan co-authored with a number of former Bush and Obama administration foreign policy veterans:

Globalization has disproportionately benefited the nation's top earners and multinational companies and aggravated growing economic inequality at home. It has not spurred broad-based increases in real wages among U.S. workers. ... There is no evidence America's middle class will rally behind efforts aimed at restoring U.S. primacy in a unipolar world, escalating a new Cold War with China, or waging a cosmic struggle between the world's democracies and authoritarian governments.<sup>[13]</sup>



On the other hand, Biden's foreign policy officials have no overarching vision of a global system of economic growth and international relations that could replace the long-standing framework of corporate nationalism and U.S. hegemony. This deeply ingrained worldview, along with a desire to pass bipartisan legislation, keep bringing them back to great power conflict as the only way forward. <sup>[14]</sup>

Thus someone like Sullivan understands that neoliberalism has reached a dead end, but he cannot see that the crisis of the present is one of the entire global system, afflicting China just as much as the U.S. and pushing both in the same direction—away from free market individualism and inequality, and toward reactionary nationalism. The only answer is collaboration among the great powers to remake that system. Instead, the Biden team appears poised to embrace the structural conflict that the broken global system imposes on both countries. For Sullivan, the alternative to neoliberalism is not a better world for everyone but the restoration of U.S. supremacy:

[E]conomics, at least as much as anything else, will determine the United States' success or failure in geopolitics. This is especially true when it comes to dealing with China ... the emerging great-power competition between the United States and China will ultimately turn on how effectively each country stewards its national economy and shapes the global economy. <sup>[15]</sup>

## **Progressive internationalist strategy under Biden**

Since the U.S.–China conflict is a manifestation of systemic problems in neoliberal capitalism, the long-term solution to the conflict requires structural reforms of the global system. Crucially, this new global system must make the lives of billions of people across the Global South matter much more than they do currently and address inequality between countries—the racist subordination of the Global South to the Global North.

Key areas of global structural reform include:

- Implementing a global regime of industrial policy that channels large-scale, high-quality, long-term investment globally, especially to the Global South. This would correct the failures of neoliberal capital markets, which have locked Global South countries in decades of “race to the bottom” competition for low levels of low-quality, short-term

investment, which has both prevented economic development and held back progress on climate change.

- Reforms that raise wages and increase the power of labor versus capital globally. These reforms can include a global minimum wage system<sup>[16]</sup> and a global regime of labor rights that are legally binding and backed by effective enforcement mechanisms.
- Reforms to the global intellectual property rights regime, which has been an important mechanism for perpetuating the subordination of the Global South and blocks economic development in those countries. These reforms can include weakening intellectual property restrictions, creating exceptions for key technologies in areas such as medicine and clean energy, and (most ambitiously) building entirely new mechanisms to ensure funding for research and development worldwide.<sup>[17]</sup>

Winning these structural reforms would not only address issues of global injustice, it would also overcome the dysfunctions of the neoliberal status quo. Creating a new model of global growth—progressive globalization—in which higher quality investment and rising wages and economic demand resolve global overcapacity, would relieve the pressures of zero-sum competition that underlie the U.S.–China conflict. Implementing these reforms requires greater global cooperation, including between the U.S. and China, so the process of achieving these reforms would embody the kind of cooperation supported in the new system.

This vision will not be fully achieved under a Biden administration. But we can use the progressive opportunities under Biden to build power for progressive internationalist alternatives and put ourselves on a pathway towards winning global structural reforms over the longer term. Below we outline some progressive internationalist struggles that we believe to be practical over the next four years.

## **Struggles around COVID-19**

The need for COVID-19 relief and reconstruction present opportunities to take some first steps toward progressive globalization. COVID-19 has dramatized the need for structural reforms to the global system and the perils of neglecting the needs of the Global South. First, we are now facing “vaccine apartheid.” Wealthier countries are hoarding vaccine supplies, leaving the much larger populations of the Global South waiting for months or years. To protect the profits of pharmaceutical companies, these same countries have blocked Global South demands to waive intellectual property rights over COVID-19 vaccines, preventing Global South producers

from manufacturing vaccines for themselves.<sup>[18]</sup> Second, many Global South countries are suffering economic crises, a product of the combined effects of the pandemic, the low quality of neoliberal economic development, and the failure of wealthier countries to support necessary relief. These problems undermine efforts to end the crisis in the Global North as well. Solutions require a shift in policy from the U.S. and other Global North countries and increased cooperation with China.

A number of mechanisms to prevent vaccine apartheid have been proposed. Perhaps the most interesting is the demand led by India and South Africa at the World Trade Organization (WTO) to suspend patent laws for COVID-19 medications.<sup>[19]</sup> If won, this measure could be used by progressives as a precedent for further reforms to the global intellectual property rights regime. Last year Biden made a verbal commitment to activist Ady Barkan that he would ensure intellectual property does not prevent other countries from accessing COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>[20]</sup>

## **Struggles around trade policy**

As discussed above, the Biden administration has voiced commitments to progressive shifts in trade policy, supporting improved international standards around labor rights and the environment. We should support these commitments and push them in a more radical direction. But without new forms of investment in the Global South, global inequality may solidify between mostly wealthier countries committed to high labor and environmental standards and mostly lower income countries that have opted out of those commitments. It would be easy for these two blocs to correspond to a U.S.-led economic bloc and a Chinese-led economic bloc, which would feed U.S. versus China polarization in the global economy and perhaps create a new age of devastating proxy wars.

At the same time, as discussed above, we must oppose the key U.S. demands in the U.S.–China trade war around industrial policy and intellectual property, and oppose attempts to expand the trade war by organizing U.S. allies into a broader anti-China front.

## **Struggles around climate change**

Progressive globalization is essential to solving the long-term global challenge of climate change. The necessary structural reforms and shifts in trade policy discussed above would ideally be implemented as part of a Global Green New Deal that applies the idea of low-carbon industrial

policy and job creation to the entire global economy. A global regime of green investment and industrial policy, freed from the constraints of neo-liberal capital markets and supported by rising wages, would give countries in the Global South the ability to develop their economies in a sustainable way, breaking the dilemma between economic development and environmental sustainability in the Global South.

We should demand that the U.S. work together with China and other countries to make this possible. U.S.–China cooperation is crucial as the countries each have their own strengths that must be combined and coordinated if we are to reduce carbon emissions as quickly as possible.<sup>[21]</sup> China is, by far, the world leader in industrial capacity across a variety of clean technology industries, and China's Belt and Road Initiative has been the largest source of investment and financing for infrastructure across the Global South. The U.S., meanwhile, leads in research and development in clean technologies and has superior access to finance capital and international alliances. There are important progressive critiques of these features of both countries, but realistically they form key building blocks of a Global Green New Deal.

A Global Green New Deal must also address intellectual property rights over clean energy technology, which make it unnecessarily expensive for Global South countries to decarbonize and make it harder for them to develop their own domestic clean energy industries. Demands for a weakening of the intellectual property rights regime have been made in previous climate negotiations, only to be blocked by the U.S. and other Global North countries.<sup>[22]</sup> We should formulate demands around this issue, while realizing these will be harder to win because they risk alienating "green" capitalists whose support the Biden administration needs for progress on climate policy. Even so, this argument will be important for making the case that protecting the intellectual property rights regime, which is another key source of U.S.–China tensions, should cease to be a priority for the U.S. government.

Domestically, we must also support Biden's goals of green industrial policy and job creation while demanding the most ambitious possible version of these programs. Success on this domestic front would strengthen a progressive approach to the U.S.–China relationship. First, progress on a green jobs program would make it easier to counter the false economic nationalist narrative that attacking Chinese business and Chinese workers is the key to American job creation. Second, progress towards industrial policy in the U.S. would make it easier to counter an important source of tension between the U.S. and China, the argument that China's use of

industrial policy is “unfair” and must end. Instead we can argue for the need to extend green industrial policy across borders into a new global system.

## **Struggles against militarism**

The tense U.S.–China security relationship is treacherous ground for progressive politics. On flashpoints like Taiwan and the South China Sea, an increasingly assertive and nationalist Chinese government poses a serious threat to democracy and peace in the region. In the short term, U.S. hegemony over the Asia-Pacific restrains Chinese military initiatives and stabilizes the security environment. That is particularly significant for progressive internationalist strategy on the status of Taiwan: as a country “in between” the U.S. and China, with significant ties to both and cultural and linguistic affinity with China, Taiwan has the potential to function as a key site for building transnational solidarity.

Yet as U.S.–China relations deteriorate, U.S. military control in the Asia-Pacific also aggravates Chinese insecurity and provokes nationalist outrage. The likely outcome will be a regional arms race and increased instability throughout Asia. Choosing one side or the other is hopeless—progressives must act to transform the structure of confrontation so that new possibilities emerge.

Unlike the issues of investment, labor or climate, there are no immediate progressive demands that would improve the situation. In the short term, progressives should aim to halt the rush toward military solutions by opposing the growing pressure for massive new anti-China weapons spending. It will be helpful to connect this to the struggle for a Global Green New Deal: as it stands, the military-industrial complex is the established form of industrial policy and government-led job creation, with powerful bipartisan support. We face a choice between military industrial policy that threatens death and green industrial policy that sustains life.

Yet anti-military campaigning will fail unless the underlying source of conflict is resolved. Progressives should begin by developing alternatives in concert with progressives from Taiwan, China’s neighbors in the South China Sea, and other countries threatened by the rise of the Chinese military. U.S. progressives who are members of the diasporas from these countries can also play an important role here. Ultimately, however, reducing the risk of international aggression and war in Asia depends on ending the zero-sum logic of the current global system.



## Anti-racist struggles

The Biden administration and the Democratic Party as a whole are sensitive to the risk that great power competition with China can intensify anti-Chinese racism and feed a form of neo-McCarthyism in which people of Chinese descent fall under suspicion of disloyalty to the U.S. Liberals often respond by decrying racism and insisting that greater conflict with China should not be xenophobic but, as demonstrated by every prior case of foreign conflict in U.S. history, this is a fantasy. Escalating conflict with China will inevitably feed escalating racism within the U.S. This contradiction opens up an opportunity to connect the dots between racism and anti-China politics and use antiracist politics against great power competition.

## Struggles around rights in China

Progressives must also take on rights abuses within China, including the crackdown on democracy and civil society in Hong Kong and the practices of mass detention, coercive assimilation, and forced labor of Uyghurs and other minorities. Many progressives have been hesitant to address these issues out of valid concerns about anti-China hawks' cynical instrumentalization of human rights criticisms. But avoiding these issues is not only a violation of progressive principles, it is also unstrategic: it leaves us open to attack from the right, it can be a source of confusion for the progressive base, and it risks alienating important allies.

Key elements of a progressive approach to this issue include:

Promoting critiques that place abuses by the Chinese government in the context of more general developments in the global system. Growing nationalism and authoritarianism are trends not only in China but worldwide, including in the U.S. Islamophobia is the source of some of the most repressive policies not only in China but also in India, Myanmar, the E.U., and many other countries, and has been fed by the U.S.-led War on Terror.

[\[23\]](#)

- Proposing responses in the context of systemic solutions. For example, the demand for a ban on Uyghur forced labor should be placed in the context of campaigns for improved labor standards that target violations throughout global supply chains rather than singling out China.
- Highlighting other forms of repression, such as crackdowns on labor activists, feminists, progressive lawyers, and others in mainland China. These forms of repression draw less attention in the U.S. and reveal the existence of mainland Chinese progressive forces and the potential to build solidarity with them.

- Arguing that great power competition is counterproductive. Increased U.S.–China tensions will not improve the status of those facing repression at the hands of the Chinese government, but will only make them more vulnerable over the long run by feeding Chinese nationalism and by reducing the willingness of the Chinese government to respond to Western concerns over rights issues.

## Conclusion

A progressive internationalist alternative to the escalating U.S.–China conflict requires a transformation of the global system as a whole. To succeed, progressive forces in the U.S. must continue on a path toward taking political power, but we must also significantly strengthen our thinking on foreign affairs. The internationalist dimension of progressive politics remains worryingly weak and has not yet produced a coherent approach to a wide range of difficult questions concerning China that are unfamiliar even to most internationalists in the U.S.

This will be a long-term struggle, and even with the best possible organizing only limited progress will be possible under the Biden administration. But the contradictions within the administration show that, alongside the dangerous forces of nationalism and great power conflict, new progressive possibilities have also emerged from the crisis of the neoliberal system—possibilities unimaginable even five years ago. If we can seize upon these possibilities, we can win a fundamentally new global system capable of resolving the world’s most urgent threats by confronting the exclusion and inequality of the present.

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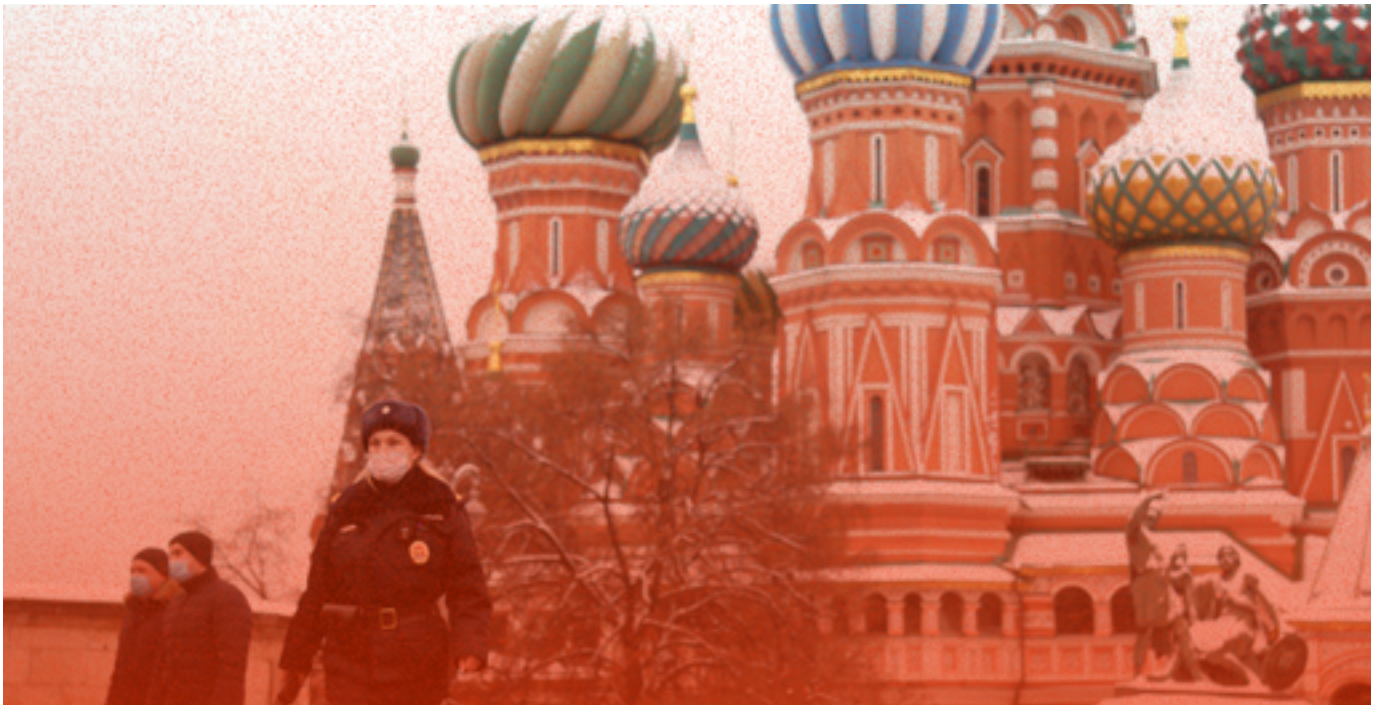
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# A Delicate Balance: The U.S.-Russia Relationship Under Biden

By David Klion



A policewoman wearing a face mask is seen at the Red Square on December 16, 2020 in Moscow, Russia. (Photo by Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images)

Throughout the Trump years, the specter of Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, has haunted the American political discourse. In the aftermath of Russia's well-documented interference campaign in the 2016 election—which took the form of hacked and selectively released emails, disinformation hyped on social media networks, and direct contacts between Russian intelligence and members of Trump's inner circle—Democrats in particular have come to fear the Kremlin, and liberal-friendly media outlets like MSNBC have indulged Cold War nostalgia and offered platforms to paranoiacs and conspiracy theorists. Thus, with Democrat Joe Biden in the White House as of January 20, it's reasonable to wonder whether the United States and Russia are entering a new era of superpower confrontation.

Russia and the U.S. are certainly not going to have warm relations anytime soon, and the Biden administration has every reason to treat Putin as a potential threat



in light of 2016, as well Russia's [more recent cyberattacks](#) on the U.S. government. But neither country can afford a new Cold War right now. To pursue one would spread chaos worldwide, impacting everything from energy prices in Germany, to political stability in Ukraine, to the safety of whole populations in Syria—all while squandering the resources the U.S. and Russia both urgently need to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, which has devastated both countries. Biden's challenge will be to find ways to confront Russia that don't rely on military buildups, and instead focus on the new battlefields Putin himself seems to prefer: the global financial system and the internet.

Biden and Russia have a long history. As a U.S. senator in the 1970s and 1980s, Biden [traveled to Moscow](#) to participate in arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. As vice president in the 2010s, he was often the Obama administration's point man in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet bloc, deployed to reassure NATO allies of Washington's commitment to their security following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and instigation of the still-ongoing civil war in eastern Ukraine. Biden also led a campaign against corruption in Ukraine, even as his son Hunter Biden was infamously collecting a paycheck from Ukrainian oligarchs as part of their failed effort to win over his father. It was in response to this influence peddling that Donald Trump, in July 2019, would hold up military assistance to Ukraine in an attempt to pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky into furnishing dirt on the Bidens. This scheme, in turn, led to Trump's impeachment, as well as a persistent headache for Biden's presidential campaign last year—one Biden's inner circle believes is part of a wider Russian disinformation campaign against them.

Biden has made clear [under his own byline](#) that he intends to confront Russia as president. He has also relied for years on the advice of Tony Blinken, his nominee to run the State Department, who is generally seen as a representative figure of the Washington national security establishment, the so-called "Blob." [In a 2017 New York Times op-ed](#), Blinken proposed lifting restrictions on lethal military aid to Ukraine, including anti-tank missiles, which Barack Obama himself had refused to do as president despite much pressure from the Blob. The Trump administration followed Blinken's advice, though not without protest from Trump himself. The lethal aid issue was emblematic of Trump's incoherent policy toward Russia: Republican senators and career national security officials continued to push military confrontation with Moscow, even as the president routinely praised Putin, questioned NATO, and undermined longstanding US policy in the region. With the selection of Blinken and the [elevation of Victoria Nuland](#), one of the Obama administration's leading Russia hawks, it seems certain that Biden will break with Trump's personal deference to the Kremlin, and that he will not replicate the Obama administration's initial pursuit of a "Reset" with Russia, a policy now widely seen as a failure. But early indications are that the Biden

administration's policy toward Russia will be sober-minded and will include re-stored cooperation on at least some issues. Jake Sullivan, the incoming national security advisor, [said recently](#) that Biden plans to renew the New Start missile treaty, an Obama legacy abandoned by Trump, which should reassure anyone who is concerned about a potential nuclear arms race. Sullivan also affirmed Biden's commitment to resuming U.S. participation in the Iran nuclear deal, provided Iran meets certain conditions; since Russia is a key signatory of the deal and a frequent strategic partner of Iran, this creates at least some space for U.S.-Russian diplomacy to function over the next few years. Diplomatic cooperation will be crucial on other matters of international concern, from containing pandemics to combating climate change—which will inevitably require buy-in from major oil and gas producers like Russia.



A poster showing six wanted Russian military intelligence officers is displayed before a news conference at the Department of Justice, on October 19, 2020 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Andrew Harnik – Pool/Getty Images)

It also seems unlikely that Ukraine will flare up as a battlefield under Biden. For all the intense debates that preceded it, the generous lethal aid package the Trump administration signed off on turned out to have little effect on the conflict in the Donbass, which has remained basically frozen throughout Trump's term in spite of regular artillery exchanges and sporadic casualties. Russia neither escalated nor backed down in the face of U.S.-supplied armaments, and while Ukraine certainly wants victory, most of the country is untouched by violence and faces the more pressing issue of its [endless struggle with corruption](#). If

anything, the drama surrounding Hunter Biden has likely impressed upon both Joe Biden and Zelensky the imperative of avoiding any hint of improper ties between the two countries—which suggests that the status quo is likely to persist in the near term.

Likewise, the civil war in Syria, which on one level can be seen as a proxy war between the U.S. and Russia and which sharply divided Obama from many of his own national security advisers, will probably not feature as prominently on Biden's watch. Syria's president, the Russian-backed autocrat Bashar al-Assad, is generally understood to have prevailed against the various Sunni rebel groups covertly backed by the U.S. under Obama. Under Trump, the U.S. launched a missile strike on Assad's airfields, bowing to pressure from the Blob that Obama had resisted—and nothing whatsoever changed. The carnage inflicted by Assad over a decade of war has been horrific, but the conflict is winding down on his terms, and the U.S. has no interest in re-escalating the war for the sake of geopolitical competition with Russia.

But while these conventional war zones will hopefully be contained, new theaters for U.S.-Russia competition could take their places. One is the arena of international capital. To the extent the original Cold War represented the triumph of U.S. capitalism over Soviet communism, the Russia it left in its wake is fully capitalist and integrated into the same global economy as the U.S. and Europe—as a leading oil and gas producer, as a consumer of German cars and French cosmetics and American iPhones, and as a point of origin for illicit capital flows into offshore bank accounts and Manhattan and London real estate. If Russia has a key vulnerability, it is the dependence of the oligarchic clique surrounding Putin on the willingness of the U.S. and its allies to launder their immense wealth.

A promising sign on this front is the new National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that passed earlier this month with enough bipartisan support to override Trump's veto, which includes a provision [effectively banning](#) anonymous shell companies. The provision, of which Biden [was an early supporter](#), simply requires the owners of shell companies to disclose their identities; in practice, this will greatly empower law enforcement agencies to police corruption, including the kind that Russia has been able to weaponize to influence U.S. politics. This is a measure that pre-2016 might have been shot down by the powerful real estate lobbies in cities like New York and Miami. A silver lining of Trump's election is that the Blob now views international money laundering not just as unethical or criminal, but as a national security threat.

The Biden administration is likely to pursue additional measures to crack down on corruption. It could, for instance, expand enforcement of the Global Magnitsky Act, which grants the U.S. wide authority to apply targeted sanctions against

corrupt officials in foreign countries. The original 2012 Magnitsky Act was passed in response to the jailing, beating and denial of medical care to its namesake, lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, in a Russian prison; repealing it appears to have been one of the core diplomatic goals Putin hoped to achieve by boosting Trump's campaign in 2016. Instead, Congress passed new sanctions on Russia over Trump's personal objections, but implementation has been minimal and haphazard. Under Biden, that could change, and Russia's oligarch class could feel newly squeezed.

Biden plans on conducting [an extensive review](#) of Trump's global sanctions regime. Many of Trump's sanctions against countries like China and Venezuela were [imposed unilaterally](#), which is generally ineffective. Biden has pledged to rebuild the State Department, which saw significant deterioration under Trump, and to recommit to diplomacy and to America's traditional allies; such an effort could result in effective multilateral sanctions against the Russian elite, which are far more likely to sting. European allies have [their own concerns](#) about Russia's corruption and human rights abuses, such as the recent attempted assassination by poisoning of opposition figure Alexei Navalny.

Cyberwarfare is also likely to expand under Biden, as his team is [already contemplating](#) attacks on Russian intelligence services and corporations in response to the recent barrage of hacks on U.S. government agencies. One indicator is Biden's [newly announced plan](#) to establish a cybersecurity position on the National Security Council, thus elevating the profile of the issue, much as he is doing on climate. While a certain amount of retaliation is to be expected, this strategy carries risks of escalation; Russia has the potential to inflict serious damage on the U.S. through cyberwarfare, and the dynamic is less asymmetric than in the financial realm, where the U.S. enjoys major advantages. Ultimately, Biden would be wise to pursue multilateral diplomatic efforts, to include China and other major powers as well as Russia, in order to establish limits on cyberwarfare and prevent it from spiraling out of control globally. This will always be a diplomatic gray area, of course, with room for plausible deniability by all parties involved no matter what is formally agreed to, but all-out cyberwar is in no country's interest, and has the potential to become a major domestic crisis when, for instance, banks and critical civilian infrastructure are targeted.

Regardless of how harsh a response Russia may deserve after the events of the past several years, Biden will have to balance that against both the risks of blowback in foreign affairs and the overriding priorities he faces at home in terms of ending the COVID-19 pandemic, repairing the severe economic damage it has caused, and attempting to undo Trump's toxic legacies on climate, immigration, regulation, labor and the basic functioning of government. A "cold peace" with Putin may be the safest and most pragmatic policy.

The 2016 interference campaign itself, while it represented an unprecedented escalation, had its roots in the many instances over the previous quarter-century in which the U.S. acted in defiance of the Kremlin's expressed wishes—intervening in Kosovo, pulling out of an ABM treaty, invading Iraq, expanding NATO eastward, overthrowing Moammar Qaddafi in Libya, encouraging “color revolutions” in Russia's periphery and regime change in Syria, and directly criticizing Putin's domestic conduct, [as Hillary Clinton herself did](#) in 2011 in response to election rigging. The merits of any of those specific policies can be debated, but what cannot be debated is that Russia has demonstrated the ability to inflict serious damage on the U.S. political system when its leaders feel they have been disrespected by ours. Biden would be wise to keep this in mind as he considers the most effective ways to hold Putin accountable.

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# The Biden Administration and Trump's Ashes: A UN Phoenix?

By Thomas G. Weiss



U.S. Vice President Joe Biden presides over a high-level United Nations Security Council meeting at U.N. headquarters December 15, 2010 in New York City. (Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images)

Throughout its history, the United Nations has confronted bureaucratic challenges and radical changes in world politics. The UN has reinvented itself several times and thus far survived.

Last year marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter in San Francisco and the treaty's entry into force on October 24. Long-planned events from June to October 2020 were to celebrate the occasion were held remotely.

What does the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting global economic meltdown mean for the United Nations? In the smoldering ashes of the Trump administration's hyper-nationalist foreign policy, will the UN be around to celebrate its centenary?

Forecasts are not in a social scientist's job description—thus, my reluctance to speculate about the Biden administration. Nonetheless, U.S.

citizens and the planet dodged a bullet in November. We could have seen the continued deterioration of international cooperation with the world's most important political and military power as well as the UN's largest funder on the sidelines.

The Biden administration clearly will be better for multilateralism. Starting with Franklin D. Roosevelt, Democrats have consistently supported the UN, and Biden's re-engagement will represent a noticeable return to the multilateral fold. However, it is uncertain how rapidly he can reverse the Trump administration's "America First" policies. It is possible that not even the end of the Trump era can resuscitate older and more ambitious visions of liberal internationalism and global governance.

It should be relatively easy after the inauguration to reverse some withdrawals from international organizations and agreements—the World Health Organization (WHO), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and perhaps the Iran deal—and restore relations with allies, especially in Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In the medium-term, we should see a return to the Human Rights Council and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and renewed financing for the family-planning of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and for UN Relief and Work Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA).

Addressing the two most urgent crises facing the United States and every other country in the world, the pandemic and climate change, will require genuine cooperation. In short, while multilateralism was not something Trump did, ever, a multilateral phoenix will have to rise from the last administration's ashes if we are to make headway against these existential threats.

History contains clues about how best to prepare the UN for an uncertain future; even with the ouster of Donald Trump, multilateralism of all stripes is under siege amidst new nationalisms. With obvious weaknesses on display, including disjointed responses to COVID-19, this essay returns to January 1942. It then parses the Trump administration's populism and the havoc created at the UN, the effects of which are likely to be long-lasting unless overdue institutional reforms become a reality.

## **Back to the Future**

We should begin with the beginning. The creation of the "United Nations" was not in San Francisco in June 1945, but rather in Washington, D.C., on

1 January 1942, when 26 (and later 47) countries signed the Declaration by United Nations. Most observers are unaware that the label for the military alliance to defeat fascism entailed a commitment to multilateralism as the standard war-time operating procedure; it also was to guide post-war peace and prosperity through an institution with the same name. The 1940s in many ways represented the pinnacle of global intergovernmental governance.

The UN's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday should have called attention to the 1942-1945 United Nations Alliance. The end of World War II—like World War I and the Napoleonic wars—spawned an experiment in international organization; rampant nationalism and going-it-alone were exposed as empty vessels. Today, armed conflicts no longer are the only or even the main threats to international order that require cooperation; COVID-19 and climate change are the latest on a list of intractable problems, which also includes terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and economic instability.

What could be more obvious than the fundamental disconnects between a growing number of global challenges and the inadequate structures for international problem-solving and decision-making? We have occasional, tactical, short-term, and local views and responses instead of sustained, strategic, long-term, and global perspectives and actions.

Why should the Biden administration revisit 1942-1945? Because almost no one questions the effort made by the United States and its Allies, not even my-country-firsters. Examining the war-time United Nations contradicts the conventional wisdom that liberalism was abandoned to confront the Nazis and Imperial Japan; Kantian ideals were essential to the Hobbesian objective of state survival.

A proverbial bottom-line was applicable then and now: when governments use intergovernmental organizations, they work. If global problems require global solutions, history suggests that we require strengthened intergovernmental organizations, especially those of the UN system. An urgent task for the Biden administration is to reinforce the crumbling foundations.

### **Would the World Be Better without the UN?**

Where might we find ourselves today had the United Nations not been created?

It is worth honestly asking, as I did in a 2018 book, “Would the world be better without the UN?” In addressing skeptics who see the world organization more as a waste than an essential component of improved global

order, the historical record illustrates both achievements and shortcomings for international peace and security; human rights and humanitarian action, and sustainable development. The unrealized potential of the UN system reflects a past record of having kept the lid on conflict cauldrons, eliminated smallpox, delivered life-saving assistance in war zones, and spawned useful development ideas and projects.

While the UN's performance often disappoints, its contributions to world order are nonetheless substantial. Indeed, it has become so much a part of today's international system that the UN is taken for granted. The danger of sliding toward marginalization was ever more evident following the election of Trump, a man intent on destroying the rules-based international order for which the United Nations is a keystone, an order that the United States, despite lapses and inconsistencies, has championed and sustained. He failed to deliver on many domestic promises; but on undermining the post-war order, Trump took huge strides. In the midst of COVID-19, after years of routinely sneering at international cooperation, Washington's threat to withdraw from the WHO was his final foray in the siege on multilateralism. In his zero-sum ideology, partners and allies were for dummies. Sustained collaboration for mutual benefit was not something Trump believes in.



President-elect Joe Biden listens as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations nominee Linda Thomas-Greenfield speaks after being introduced at an event announcing key foreign policy and national security nominees and appointments at the Queen Theatre on November 24, 2020 in Wilmington, Delaware. (Photo by Mark Makela/Getty Images)



Multilateralism was totally absent in the November 2018 mid-term elections as it had been in the 2016 presidential campaign, in debates among Democratic aspirants, and in the so-called debates between Trump and Biden. However, it simply has to become a top priority for the Biden administration. There are comforting signs from the president-elect, who has devoted considerable energy to foreign policy and warm relations with friends and even with enemies. The key foreign policy appointments, including the nomination of respected career diplomat Linda Thomas-Greenfield as UN ambassador, indicate that a modicum of optimism is justified.

## Value for Money?

The 2020 General Assembly was, thankfully, the last appearance by the former reality-TV star on the world's biggest stage. However, the "Age of Trump" will continue to loom large, internationally as well as domestically. Alas, the 45<sup>th</sup> president was not one of a kind; nativist, populist, autocratic leaders can be found the world over. The range of values on display in the UN and other international organizations is wider and more hostile than in the past.

Amid the chaos of scandals and a failed impeachment, the attacks on multilateralism were often ignored, but they should not have been. There are many candidates for the most bizarre example of Trump's short-sightedness. Until the decision to halt funding to the World Health Organization in the midst of the pandemic, my personal favorite had been the announced threat in October 2018 to withdraw from the Universal Postal Union (UPU), which since 1874 apparently had been threatening U.S. sovereignty and interests by fixing international postal rates.

Still, we must tally the damage from the UN's most important member state and largest funder. Among his first acts after the inauguration in January 2017 was cutting UNFPA funding and at year's end withdrawing completely from UNESCO. What happened in between? Pulling out of the Paris Agreement and cancelling the commitment to the Green Climate Fund despite four, now six, consecutive years of record-setting temperatures and natural catastrophes; and pulling out of the Global Compact on Migration. There followed the veto of a Security Council resolution questioning the wisdom of recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital. When the General Assembly agreed, the administration halted its remaining contribution to UNRWA.



The year 2018 was as negative for multilateralism. Washington withdrew from the “biased cesspool” (then UN permanent representative Nikki Haley’s words) of the Human Rights Council after having ripped up the P5+1 Iran deal facilitated by the UN; it then eliminated funding for UNRWA along with threatening the UPU. Indeed, one of the most chilling speeches of 2018 was Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s remarks at the German Marshall Fund in December in which even the U.S.-dominated World Bank and International Monetary Fund were institutions that “corroded” the international system.

An essential concern for the Biden team should be the extent to which China, and to a lesser extent Russia, have benefited from Washington’s retreat from global leadership. Both Beijing and Moscow have long sought to divide the West, but both were able to relax and let the Trump administration drive the wedges.

At the start of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the UN is the logical location to convene conversations and orchestrate actions to defeat COVID-19 and address climate change, economic crises, terrorism, the proliferation of WMDs, and mass atrocities. To state the obvious, a single country no matter how powerful cannot solve them.

Equally obvious are the UN’s limitations—not only its sovereignty-bound foundations but also its atomized and wasteful operations. We have to ask whether the United Nations can become a more effective mechanism to pool efforts in a world of sovereign states. The waste and lack of synergy in the UN bureaucracy and the system’s organizations have been detailed by high-level panels, international commissions, academic treatises, and the media. They emphasize the fragmentation of the so-called UN system and turf-wars over scarce resources.

Trying to reform the UN has been an ongoing task since the ink dried on the Charter in 1945. Efforts seemingly never cease to make it more inclusive, transparent, and accountable. Criticism of the organization has been growing, and not only in Washington. The fall-out from the pandemic will not increase confidence in intergovernmental organizations; powerful and less powerful countries and their publics appear increasingly skeptical about their efficacy. Previously sympathetic governments—even the Nordics—are asking tough questions about costs and benefits. They are distancing themselves from international organizations that they long have automatically financed. In brief, the multilateral narrative has less visceral appeal than in 1945, or even a few years ago.

Could UN Secretary-General António Guterres use the Trump administration's tightening of financial screws to pursue long overdue change under the Biden administration? Could Guterres, or his successor, move toward emphasizing the UN's comparative advantages, centralizing operations, and trimming bureaucracy? Could part of his pitch for what will undoubtedly be a second mandate involve substantial proposals and actions rather than the marginal ones made to date? We must hope that he rediscovers the fortitude not to shy away from the Sisyphean task of "transforming" the way that the UN does business. If not, we could have a real-time test of my proposition that the world could be even worse-off without the world body.

## Conclusion

I conclude with the oft-cited but still meaningful quip attributed to Dag Hammarskjöld: "The UN was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell." The United Nations is one reason that we are not in the netherworld already. Yet, a world without it is not impossible if current political conditions continue or deteriorate.

The United Nations arose from the literal ashes of World War II. Can it rise phoenix-like from the figurative ashes of four years of the Trump administration's efforts to destroy the foundations of the rules-based international order?

"We are calling for a great reawakening of nations," is how Donald Trump concluded his 2017 General Assembly remarks. He overlooked the fact that the United States helped to create the world organization to curb the demonstrated horrors of nations and nationalism run amok.

President Biden and other heads of state at the 2021 assembly, and the rest of us, should call for a great reawakening of the United Nations.

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# Biden's Nuclear Agenda

## By Joseph Gerson



An Anti-nuclear sign is seen pegged to the wall outside Her Majesty's Naval Base, Clyde, on October 25, 2020 in Faslane, Scotland. (Photo by Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images)

Among the challenges President-elect Joe Biden will face on assuming power will be maintaining the illusion that the United States and other nuclear weapons states are committed to the obligation under Article VI of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty article VI obligation to engage in “good faith” negotiations for the complete elimination of their nuclear arsenals.

Without serious and credible steps toward fulfilment of that obligation, the world will face both the increasing danger of nuclear war and increasing numbers of nations opting to equalize the balance of terror by creating their own nuclear arsenals.

Biden comes to office in the aftermath of Donald Trump's devastating assaults on the world's nuclear arms control architecture, developed through challenging negotiations over the past 60 years. He also inherits the 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, which reiterated the U.S. first strike nuclear

war fighting doctrine, called for the deployment of more usable battlefield nuclear weapons, increased the circumstances in which nuclear weapons can be used—including in response to cyber-attacks—and increased spending for nuclear weapons and their delivery systems as part of a 30-year, \$2 trillion nuclear weapons “modernization” program. Biden is no nuclear weapons abolitionist. What arms control and disarmament measures he may wish to pursue will be constrained by the need to spend of his political capital on defending and preserving U.S. constitutional democracy from the attacks of right-wing white supremacist forces, containing the COVID-19 pandemic and revitalizing the country’s devastated economy.

His nuclear weapons priority during his first weeks in office will be negotiating a five-year extension of the New START Treaty with Russia before the Treaty’s expiration in February. The second and more challenging priority will be rejoining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the United Nations agreement which capped Iran’s nuclear program. Trump violated the agreement by unilaterally withdrawing from it.

Trump also added a major complication to future U.S.-Iranian negotiations by celebrating the Israeli killing of Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh, Iran’s leading nuclear scientist. The assassination has reinforced the hand of Iranian conservatives who oppose revitalization of the JCPOA, and who will likely come to power in Iran’s spring election. President Biden will thus have to restore trust and reach an agreement with Iran during his first two months in office if the agreement is to be saved.

While Biden has signaled an interest in reducing U.S. nuclear weapons spending, he remains committed to most of the \$2 trillion U.S. nuclear upgrade. Possible cuts could come in the \$85 billion program to replace the country’s 400 highly vulnerable “use them or lose them” land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) and to future deployment of the destabilizing standoff cruise missiles which are adding fuel to the arms races with Russia and China.

As we approach the August 2021 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference (RevCon) at the United Nations, Biden’s nuclear commitments are not the only obstacles to progress toward fulfillment of its Article VI commitment to “good faith” negotiations for the complete elimination of the world’s nuclear weapons. With the relative decline of its conventional forces and pressed by NATO forces along its borders, Russia has increased its reliance on nuclear weapons, and deployed a new generation of the omnicidal weapons. France, the U.K., India, Pakistan and Israel are each

upgrading their nuclear arsenals. North Korea is augmenting its arsenal, which can reach targets including Seoul, Tokyo, Guam and the United States. And, in the face of the U.S. nuclear buildup, China is adding to its deterrent arsenal to ensure its second-strike capacity.

All of this serves to undermine the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), and increases the probability that other nations will withdraw from the pact that they experience as enforcing the double standards of a discriminatory nuclear disorder and will develop nuclear arsenals of their own.

## **The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty**

The NPT is the endangered cornerstone of the arms control architecture and the foundation of nuclear disarmament diplomacy. It was initially designed to prevent nuclear weapons proliferation and to return humanity to a nuclear weapons-free world. The treaty entered into force in 1970, with 191 countries now legally obligated to fulfill their NPT obligations. In essence, the Treaty is a three-pillared bargain between the nuclear powers and non-nuclear weapons states: Non-nuclear weapons states renounce ever developing or possessing nuclear weapons. In exchange, the nuclear powers guaranteed them access to nuclear power for peaceful purposes. A major flaw in the bargain is Article IV, the second pillar of the Treaty, which guarantees non-nuclear weapons states the inalienable right to generate nuclear power for peaceful purposes. Consequently, the world now has 440 nuclear power plants emitting poisonous radiation. With long-term provisions for safe storage of this nuclear waste yet to be devised, communities and the environment across the planet are held hostage to deadly contamination.

In addition, India, and Pakistan, which never signed the NPT, and North Korea which did, used their nuclear power programs as cover to develop their nuclear weapons capabilities. Nuclear power programs in countries including Iran, Japan, South Korea and Brazil have raised concerns about possible future breakouts from the Treaty.

The third and most consistently violated pillar of the NPT is Article VI. It requires all parties to the Treaty “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament.” Additional treaty provisions mandated that review conferences be held every five years to ensure that the treaty is being implemented. It further mandated that 25 years after the treaty came into force a



conference was to be held to determine if the treaty should be extended or continued indefinitely.

Despite fears in the early 1960s that 20 or more nations could soon develop nuclear weapons, horizontal proliferation has been limited to India, Pakistan, Israel and South Africa (which later eliminated its nuclear arsenal).

## **Commitments Made and Broken Leading to the TPNW**

By the time of the 1995 review and extension conference, there were growing doubts that it would ever be fully implemented. Despite the end of the Cold War, the U.S. had 10,577 nuclear weapons and Russia had 27,000. India, not a party to the Treaty, had exploded an “atomic device” in 1974. Mordechai Vanunu was isolated in an Israeli prison cell after revealing photographs confirming the existence of Israel’s nuclear program in 1986. And, in 1991 the U.S. and Britain had explicitly threatened Iraq with nuclear attacks in the weeks preceding the Gulf War.

Due to these circumstances, there was concern that the Treaty would collapse, but a compromise was achieved. In exchange for the indefinite extension of the Treaty, the nuclear powers renewed their commitments to Article VI and agreed that Preparatory Committee meetings would be held prior to future Review Conferences. The declaration mandated universalization of the Treaty to bring India, Pakistan and Israel into the NPT order, negotiation of a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and Fissile Material Cut Off Treaty. It also reaffirmed the value of nuclear weapons free zones and required that nuclear weapons states commit to not attacking the non-nuclear weapons states with nuclear weapons. Crucial to the agreement to extend the Treaty was the commitment to work for the establishment of a Middle East nuclear weapons-free zone.

It’s been downhill since then. In 2005, during the George W. Bush administration, the nuclear powers delayed agreement on an agenda, leaving little time for meaningful negotiations. Only one and a half of the 2010 RevCon’s 13 agreed steps have been implemented. And in 2015, the Review Conference collapsed in failure when the Obama Administration refused to commit to participating in an initial conference to develop the Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone mandated in 1995 to extend the Treaty.

It was against this background, that in 2017, that brought 122 governments, international organizations, and civil society representatives together to negotiate the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Having secured the necessary ratifications, the Treaty will enter into force in January 2022. The TPNW, which serves to further undermine the legitimacy of nuclear weapons, is designed to reinforce the NPT.

It prohibits the development, production, manufacture, acquisition, possession, stockpiling, transfer, stationing, installation and threat of use of nuclear weapons. Among its most important articles are those that forbid non-nuclear weapon states to assist the nuclear activities of the nuclear powers, for example refueling nuclear capable bombers; the mandate to assist nuclear weapons victims, and the requirement that Treaty nations “encourage States not party to this Treaty to sign, ratify, accept, approve or accede to the Treaty.” “Encouragement” could take many, potentially coercive, forms.

None of the nuclear weapons states have signed the TPNW, and they are unified in their opposition to the Treaty.

## **What to Expect from the 2021 Review Conference**

As we approach this August’s Review Conference, twice postponed due to the pandemic, expectations are low for meaningful breakthroughs. This could further undermine the Treaty. Activists associated with the International Campaign Against Nuclear Weapon will certainly come to New York to press diplomats for additional TPNW signatures and ratification.

Fears that a failed Review Conference will spur further nuclear weapons proliferation is a source of concern to the Biden Administration and other nuclear powers. Hopes have been expressed that extension of the New START Treaty and possibly the revitalization of the JCPOA could provide sufficient goodwill to elicit cooperation and agreement on a final declaration. Although there have been no indications from the Biden camp that it will do so, it has been suggested that a U.S. no-first use declaration at the conference, even before it could be codified in the Administration’s nuclear posture review, would inspire and transform the diplomatic environment. That said, much of the world remains outraged by the failure to implement Article VI, to fulfill the 13 steps of the 2010 RevCon, and by the increasing

dangers of the great and lesser powers' nuclear arms races. There also remains the possibility that, like President Obama, President Biden will continue providing cover for Israel's ostensibly secret nuclear arsenal. Should it refuse to commit to supporting negotiations for a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, the Review Conference could fail, further weakening the NPT order.

One thing remains certain. With the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* Doomsday clock warning that humanity is 100 seconds from unimaginable catastrophe, diplomats and international civil society activists committed to ensuring human survival will descend on New York in August to press for meaningful action to eliminate the dangers of nuclear weapons.

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# The Changing Same: Biden and the False Promise of a “Return to Normalcy”

By Kali Akuno



Trump supporters clash with police and security forces as people try to storm the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 in Washington, DC. (photo by Brent Stirton/Getty Images)

## The Liberal Prescription

From the modern Liberal perspective, the presidency of Donald Trump was a gross departure from the norms of the American democratic tradition and a deep stain on the history of the nation that needed to be removed and cleansed. Following this logic, the centrist led Democratic party sought to remove Donald Trump from office an unprecedented two times and re-establish a sense of “normalcy” to the American political landscape.

The vast majority of the forces that constitute the left in the United States agreed with this narrative and the prioritization of the objectives derived from it. The question is why? A critical examination of U.S. history demonstrates that the Trump Presidency was in fact not an aberration, but a continuation of many fundamental policies and practices pursued by his

predecessors over the course of the last 243 years. So, if it wasn't a question of profound differences in policy and prescription, then what? The answer is that most who supported the Trump regime focused not on what it pursued, but the optics of how it pursued it.

Long before Donald Trump became president, there were clear signs that he possessed an authoritarian personality. Trump is a brazen misogynist, who politically and ideologically aligned with white supremacist, neo-confederate and neo-fascist forces. He wore these alliances proudly on his sleeve. However, in regards to the actual policies that his administration pursued, he demonstrated little in the realm of originality, just some colorful and unconventional flair in how he pursued them.

The agenda of the Trump regime was a hodgepodge of neo-nationalist, neoliberal, and ultra-conservative policies and positions that these right-wing constituencies were pushing, many for decades with mixed results (like recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and placing the US Embassy there). The far right found an executive champion in Trump. Through his administration many of the minority and outright fringe positions and policies of the far-right forces such as the Tea Party movement became the animus of the U.S. government. This enabled Trump to govern from a position of strength, which he used unsparingly. Yet still, this was not unique. Ronald Reagan rose to power in 1980 riding similar waves of reaction.

What Trump did do that was rather unique was direct the awesome might of the U.S. government's repressive apparatus internally, toward his elite opponents in the Democratic Party, who normally constitute the "loyal opposition" when not in power. The Trump regime pursued this agenda with a flare and fashion not seen since the days of his idol, Andrew Jackson. The ire and hatred of both Nixon and Reagan for their political opponents and enemies was no secret, but they did not brazenly display their views to the public, nor make consistent castigations and threats.

That said, repression on the domestic front is not new in American politics nor is systematically targeting, oppressing, and negating the rights of non-white populations, particularly **Black**, **Indigenous** and **Latino** communities, the **militant left** and transgender individuals. Targeting white elites inside of the country, however, has fundamentally been considered beyond the pale.

For white liberal forces, the Trump regime represented blowback of the highest order. Further, he made it known without question over the course



of his first 100 days in office that he had no regard for the “sanctity” of the constitution and that he was not planning on leaving power. He clearly had in mind the fashioning of some type of dictatorship, and he stated as much. Liberal denial was rampant throughout the duration of his regime, but this threat became more open and obvious to nearly everyone. The threat of a dictatorship fostered the aberration narrative advanced by mainstream, centrist Liberals and moved much of the progressive and left forces in the country to unite with them under the increasingly large but untenable tent of the Democratic Party in the effort to defeat Trump at the ballot box.

This strategy harkens back to the Popular Front employed by the Communist Party and its allies in the fight against fascism in Europe and Asia in the 1930s and 1940s. Then as now, this strategy was predicated on the notion that due to the asymmetry of power between the working class and the bourgeoisie in the favor of the bourgeoisie, the working class had to ally with those bourgeois forces willing to fight the forces of fascism and preserve the alleged aegis of bourgeois democracy.

This orientation deviates directly from the core principles and practices of others on the left who call for working class self-organization as the ultimate means of liberation. The Popular Front orientation foregoes class struggle for class collaboration, and relegates the question of a socialist transition to a distant and unspecified future, and surrenders the leadership of the social movement to bourgeois forces.

For many forces these concessions were—and are—warranted because of the organizational and positional weaknesses of the left, particularly its insufficient social base within the working class itself, when compared with the voting base and motley alliance that is the Democratic party. As a result, the dominant left assessment was that the broadest possible alliance was going to be needed and necessary to deal with the pending threat of an authoritarian coup and the enshrinement of fascism, and that this was the best that could be done for now to evade catastrophe and preserve some degree of democratic space.

The other left justification was that by defeating Trump and the movement enabling him, there could be a return to some semblance of “normalcy” and “decency” to the American body politic. In this thought, the left was clearly not alone. From the start, the Biden campaign staked its claim of legitimacy on his unique ability to “heal” the nation, restore bipartisanship, and return the country back to normal and restore its credibility in the eyes of its strategic allies internationally and the world at large.

## A Presentation of False Hopes

Liberal and progressive forces throughout the U.S. rejoiced on Saturday, November 7th when Joe Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 Presidential election. In the eyes of these forces, the record voter turnout that enabled this victory vindicated the “anybody but Trump” election strategy of the Biden campaign and the Democratic National Committee. The “return to normalcy” allure appeared to stop the advance of Trump’s revanchist politics, with its elan for white supremacy and the threat of authoritarian rule posed by the continuation of his regime and the forces it represents.

Not enough was done, however, to critically examine what this “return” would mean, particularly by the left. This will have some serious consequences in the future. President Biden’s “return to normalcy” entails the revival of the American bipartisan consensus, the resuscitation of NATO and the multilateral Bretton Wood institutions of global finance, trade regulation, security, and states’ rights, and the restoration of the dominance of neoliberal market regulations and dynamics.

Long before being elected, Biden made it known that it was not going to support a number of progressive demands and policy prescriptions like universal health care (even in the midst of a pandemic), the elimination of student debt, or the Green New Deal. He stubbornly continued to oppose them even as these policy prescriptions were supported by the overwhelming majority of people self-identified as Democrats. Over the course of the summer of 2020, in the midst of the George Floyd Rebellion, one of the largest social movements in U.S. history, The Biden campaign made it clear that it would not support one of the primary demands of the movement, which was to defund the police on the reformist end, or abolish them on the revolutionary end.

Instead, the Biden campaign brazenly promised to expand funding and training for the police. Since being elected, President Biden has not only doubled down on his rejection of these demands and positions, his team has gone on the offensive against the progressive wing of the party, alleging that it was these demands that cost the Democratic party its solid majority in the House and the opportunity to unquestionably control the Senate.

Despite promises of a “return to normal,” the hope it could be accomplished will be conditioned by the power and will of the loyal opposition of

the Republican Party. This is evidenced by a number of hard facts from the November 2020 elections that liberals and progressives have to grapple with in regards to the quest to return to normalcy. For one, Trump secured the second highest vote count in U.S. history—more than 74 million votes. In addition, the Blue wave that was supposed to accompany a Biden victory and usher in the restoration of normalcy not only didn't manifest, it went in reverse. Democrats **lost eight seats** in the House for a total of 222 and will only have a slim four-vote margin of control. This the smallest majority for the Democrats in the House since World War II. Democrats in the Senate didn't fare much better. Even though the Democrats secured **a historic win in Georgia** on January 5, picking up both Senate seats, giving them the slimmest of majorities, the Republicans retained the ability to stymie legislation.

Biden has made it known that he is going to try and work with the Republicans to restore civility and order. Therefore, Vice President Kamala Harris won't be using her tie breaking vote to ramrod the Republicans into shape unless it's absolutely necessary to uphold the dominance of the neoliberal program. This means that the strategic leader of the Republican party, Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, will retain effective control over the Senate, even though Chuck Schumer will officially hold title of Senate Majority Leader.

What these results clearly indicate is that the current neo-confederate and economic nationalist (the "patriots" in Trump's jargon) ideological and political variants of the Republican Party have widespread support and are not leaving the political landscape anytime soon. So, returning to the "normalcy" of the old American neoliberal bipartisan consensus to deepen capital accumulation and social control is in serious question.

And this is just on the "domestic" front. The gains of neo-fascists and far-right nationalist forces throughout the world, aiming to resort back to various types of import substitution and nationalistic economic programs, will also hinder, if not block, the revival of the neoliberal strategy of capital accumulation on a global scale. Given these dynamics, the question has to be raised, can the Biden regime guide the empire back to normalcy of neoliberalism and the secure position of hegemon of the capitalist world-system?

The clear answer is no. There is no going back. And if the 2020/2021 election results weren't proof enough that the forces of the right aren't going anywhere, the "insurrection" of January 6, 2021 confirmed this to the world. What is clear is that the crackdown and round up that is presently

being conducted by the U.S. government against the far-right forces that conducted this insurrection is only proving many of their conspiracy theories about the “deep state” and widening the political divide. This is particularly true among the 67% of the Republicans who said they **would vote for Trump again in 2024**. This means that in the effort to try and “heal” the nation, Biden is may to have to govern to the right and grant it some serious concessions in order to fracture the movement’s pragmatists from its true believers.

The aforementioned political dynamics constitute one limitation. The more substantive limitation is economic, or more specifically, the transformation of the relationships of production within the capitalist world-system that have been developing over the last 50 years, but quickened over the past 10. Capitalism as a system is in deep crisis, and neither neoliberal nor nationalist strategies of accumulation can resolve its contradictions. Since Biden and his regime are aiming to resuscitate neoliberalism, that is the variant that will be addressed here.

The neoliberal strategy of capital accumulation and social control that the Biden regime is aiming to reinstate requires the occupation of new lands and resources to extract from, including novel resources like DNA and megadata. Further, it requires the opening of new markets and secure fields of investment, along with the privatization of state resources and reserves including potentially social security and Medicare. And finally, it requires the deregulation of financial and labor markets, the elimination of environmental protection standards and controls, and the proletarianization of new labor pools and/or the pauperization of existing ones.

Conditions within the capitalist world-system, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, restrain the realization of all of these requirements to varying degrees. Some, like the occupation of new lands, are either physically prohibitive, as for instance the wholesale colonization of Antarctica given its frigid conditions, or remain largely in the realm of science fiction, as is the case of the colonization of the Moon, Mars, or various asteroids and comets. Not that humanity doesn’t currently possess the means to reach these extraterrestrial bodies, but the costs to do so in a wholesale manner are still too prohibitive (in addition to the fact various technological aspects are not developed enough either).

Others, like the opening of new markets, are limited by the political dynamics of competition between capitalists, states and non-state actors contending for monopoly control over these resources. This is most evidenced in Africa, where a second scramble to control the resources of

the continent (physical and human) is underway between the forces of the West (i.e. the US, Canada, the EU, and Australia) and those allied with China and its ruling class. This scramble is stimulating massive competition for investment (like the African side of China's so-called "Silk Road"), foreign land grabs for the specific purpose of producing exclusive food crop exports for their home markets, unprecedented military build ups like AFRICOM, and numerous armed conflicts raging throughout the continent. All of these factors hinder capital's ability to penetrate, expand, and realize a return on investment in these areas, limiting the system's ability to reproduce itself.

And then **there is China itself** that the U.S. ruling class has to deal with. Although the Chinese and U.S. economies are deeply intertwined, China is expected to become the world's commanding economy by 2028, if not sooner. It is by far and away the world's largest industrial producer, exporter and consumer of raw materials. It is now the world's largest creditor nation, the largest infrastructure builder, it commands the world's largest army, and is the U.S. government's only rival in terms of military expenditures. China is also challenging and transforming the rules of the accumulation game, particularly the interstate legal based norms of the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). One of the best examples of how China is changing the rules of the game is how it generally rearticulates the copyright rules of the system. As a matter of strategy, it turns them on their head, compelling transnational corporations to engage in technology transfers as a cost of doing business in China.

China is also strenuously challenging the monetary rules of the world capitalist system by politically and financially incentivizing its growing number of "partners" to trade in the Yuan rather than the U.S. Dollar, which has been the standard measure of currency transactions since World War II. These are just some of the critical ways that China is challenging U.S. hegemony.

In order to sustain its position as the hegemon of the world-capitalist system, this challenge cannot be ignored by the U.S. state and capitalist class. Therefore, Biden, as Trump and Obama before him, is making the containment of China one of his administration's primary strategic priorities. He and his team are going to try and tone down the tensions prompted by the Trump administration, particularly the war of words and sanctions. However, the Biden administration is planning on continuing the U.S. military build-up in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as the multilateral trade and security agreements with China's neighbors in an effort to contain China



and forestall the inevitable war that both sides think is coming. However, it is clear that this conflagration won't be playing out on the same grounds as it was in 2017, when Obama departed office. China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated without question that it has the greatest industrial capacity on the planet and that is not without international allies of its own.

Taking on China and the COVID-19 pandemic through unprecedented deficit spending is not sustainable, even for the U.S. government. The cycle of capital reproduction, both domestically and internationally, is too fractured for the standard fiscal stimulus devices to quickly correct. The Federal Reserve has already poured trillions into the banks and the stock market to sustain the capitalist pandemic during the health pandemic. So, Biden's stimulus plans can and will be only short-term measures at best. Without the power of the Presidency, the Republicans are going to return to the politics of "fiscal responsibility" and place serious constraints on the Biden regime that will have a major impact on the midterm elections in 2022. The most likely outcome is that by early 2022, Biden will have to make a hard pivot towards imposing austerity on the country, which will only aggravate the growing social and political hostilities in the country.

## A Way Forward

As all of this clearly indicates, there is no "going back to normal." The left in the U.S. needs to get a firm grip on this reality sooner rather than later so that it can chart its own course of action, independent of the Biden regime and the Democratic party. This path must address the fundamental means for organizational and community self-defense in the face of the rising far-right threats, and push the movement for radical transformation that erupted in 2020 with the upsurge in worker strikes and the George Floyd rebellion even further ahead.

Our transformational program must rely on the self-organization and self-financing practices of the working class and oppressed communities themselves in order to exert maximum autonomy from the sway of the Democratic party and the legion of compromises it is going to have to make to preserve the empire. Some of the core elements of our program, given the structural dynamics at play, must entail elements of the following:

- Extensive and transformational ***mutual aid*** to address the growing material and social needs of working class communities to address the

food insecurities that many are now encountering, and the growing threat of homelessness confronting millions. Since the onset of the pandemic, millions have engaged in mutual aid efforts. The challenge is linking these efforts with the self-organized productive efforts of the working class to figure out how to sustain these efforts without having to rely on philanthropy and move beyond volunteerism.

- One of the first steps towards linking the necessary mutual aid work with the self-organized productive work of the working class is linking it with the existing **food security and food sovereignty** efforts in communities throughout the country. Our mutual aid work must determine the concrete caloric needs of our communities and encourage the millions of people now thrown out work to engage in farming and other forms of food production to expand this form of self-production to create a system of use exchange that will challenge the commodities market for food and **provide more security for those in need**.
- Perhaps the most critical step will be expanding the degree of **worker self-organization** during this period. In addition to buttressing the mutual aid and food sovereignty work, this orientation also calls for millions of workers to engage in developing various types of cooperatives (worker, producer, consumer, community), solidarity economy institutions, and perhaps most importantly **organizing themselves within the existing points of production** to exercise their full economic, social and cultural rights, as well as press the struggle for the democratization of their workplaces and the overall economy.

To link and coordinate all of these efforts, working class communities are going to have to develop new instruments of self-governance, like **People's Assemblies**. These new forms of self-governance will have to create means of direct democracy that will be needed to administer the relief that our communities need in real time in an equitable manner that will be free from the limitations of the discriminatory bureaucracy of the state.

These practices of working class counter-hegemonic positioning offer a promising way forward in these times of transitional turbulence. In order to survive, the left must stop looking back the horrors of bourgeois democracy in the guise of “returning to normal”, and look instead towards forging an eco-socialist future we self-construct from the ground up.

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