

# Why America Must Lead Again

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Biden campaigning in Elkader, Iowa, December 2019  
Calla Kessler / The New York Times

By nearly every measure, the credibility and influence of the United States in the world have diminished since President Barack Obama and I left office on January 20, 2017. President Donald Trump has belittled, undermined, and in some cases abandoned U.S. allies and partners. He has turned on our own intelligence professionals, diplomats, and troops. He has emboldened our adversaries and squandered our leverage to contend with national security challenges from North Korea to Iran, from Syria to Afghanistan to Venezuela, with practically nothing to show for it. He has launched ill-advised trade wars, against the United States' friends and foes alike, that are hurting the American middle class. He has abdicated American leadership in mobilizing collective action to meet new threats, especially those unique to this century. Most profoundly, he has turned away from the democratic values that give strength to our nation and unify us as a people.

Meanwhile, the global challenges facing the United States—from [climate change](#) and mass migration to technological disruption and infectious diseases—have grown more complex and more urgent, while the rapid advance of authoritarianism, nationalism, and illiberalism has undermined our ability to collectively meet them. Democracies—paralyzed by hyperpartisanship, hobbled by corruption, weighed down by extreme inequality—are having a harder time delivering for their people. Trust in democratic institutions is down. Fear of the Other is up. And the international system that the United States so carefully constructed is coming apart at the seams. Trump and demagogues around the world are leaning into these forces for their own personal and political gain.

The next U.S. president will have to address the world as it is in January 2021, and picking up the pieces will be an enormous task. He or she will have to salvage our reputation, rebuild confidence in our leadership, and mobilize our country and our allies to rapidly meet new challenges. There will be no time to lose.

As president, I will take immediate steps to renew U.S. democracy and alliances, protect the United States' economic future, and once more have America lead the world. This is not a moment for fear. This is the time to tap the strength and audacity that took us to victory in two world wars and brought down the Iron Curtain.

The triumph of democracy and liberalism over fascism and autocracy created the free world. But this contest does not just define our past. It will define our future, as well.

## RENEWING DEMOCRACY AT HOME

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First and foremost, we must repair and reinvigorate our own democracy, even as we strengthen the coalition of democracies that stand with us around the world. The United States' ability to be a force for progress in the world and to mobilize collective action starts at home. That is why I will remake our educational system so that a child's opportunity in life isn't determined by his or her zip code or race, reform the criminal justice system to eliminate inequitable disparities and end the epidemic of mass incarceration, restore the Voting Rights Act to ensure that everyone can be heard, and return transparency and accountability to our government.

But democracy is not just the foundation of American society. It is also the wellspring of our power. It strengthens and amplifies our leadership to keep us safe in the world. It is the engine of our ingenuity that drives our economic prosperity. It is the heart of who we are and how we see the world—and how the world sees us. It allows us to self-correct and keep striving to reach our ideals over time.

As a nation, we have to prove to the world that the United States is prepared to lead again—not just with the example of our power but also with the power of our example. To that end, as president, I will take decisive steps to renew our core values. I will immediately reverse the Trump administration's cruel and senseless policies that separate parents from their children at our border; end Trump's detrimental asylum policies; terminate the travel ban; order a review of Temporary Protected Status, for vulnerable populations; and set our annual refugee admissions at 125,000, and seek to raise it over time, commensurate with our responsibility and our values. I will reaffirm the ban on torture and restore greater transparency in U.S. military operations, including policies instituted during the Obama-Biden administration to reduce civilian casualties. I will restore a government-wide focus on lifting up women and girls around the world. And I will ensure that the White House is once again the great defender—not the chief assailant—of the core pillars and institutions of our democratic values, from respecting freedom of the press, to protecting and securing the sacred right to vote, to upholding judicial independence. These changes are just a start, a day-one down payment on our commitment to living up to democratic values at home.

As a nation, we have to prove to the world that the United States is prepared to lead again.

I will enforce U.S. laws without targeting particular communities, violating due process, or tearing apart families, as Trump has done. I will secure our borders while ensuring the dignity of migrants and upholding their legal right to seek asylum. I have released plans that outline these policies in detail and describe how the United States will focus on the root causes driving immigrants to our southwestern border. As vice president, I secured bipartisan support for a \$750 million aid program to back up commitments from the leaders of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to take on the corruption, violence, and endemic poverty driving people to leave their homes there. Security improved and migration flows began to decrease in countries such as El Salvador. As president, I will build on that initiative with a comprehensive four-year, \$4 billion regional strategy that requires countries to contribute their own resources and undertake significant, concrete, verifiable reforms.

I will also take steps to tackle the self-dealing, conflicts of interest, dark money, and rank corruption that are serving narrow, private, or foreign agendas and undermining our democracy. That starts by fighting for a constitutional amendment to completely eliminate private dollars from federal elections. In addition, I will propose a law to strengthen prohibitions on foreign nationals or governments trying to influence U.S. federal, state, or local elections and direct a new independent agency—the Commission on Federal Ethics—to ensure vigorous and unified enforcement of this and other anticorruption laws. The lack of transparency in our campaign finance system, combined with extensive foreign money laundering, creates a significant vulnerability. We need to close the loopholes that corrupt our democracy.

Having taken these essential steps to reinforce the democratic foundation of the United States and inspire action in others, I will invite my fellow democratic leaders around the world to put strengthening democracy back on the global agenda. Today, democracy is under more pressure than at any time since the 1930s. Freedom House has reported that of the 41 countries consistently ranked "free" from 1985 to 2005, 22 have registered net declines in freedom over the last five years.

From Hong Kong to Sudan, Chile to Lebanon, citizens are once more reminding us of the common yearning for honest governance and the universal abhorrence of corruption. An insidious pandemic, corruption is fueling oppression, corroding human dignity, and equipping authoritarian leaders with a powerful tool to divide and weaken democracies across the world. Yet when the world's democracies look to the United States to stand for the values that unite the country—to truly lead the free world—Trump seems to be on the other team, taking the word of autocrats while showing disdain for democrats. By presiding over the most corrupt administration in modern American history, he has given license to kleptocrats everywhere.



A demonstrator in Beirut, Lebanon, January 2020  
Mohamed Azakir / Reuters

During my first year in office, the United States will organize and host a global Summit for Democracy to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world. It will bring together the world's democracies to strengthen our democratic institutions, honestly confront nations that are backsliding, and forge a common agenda. Building on the successful model instituted during the Obama-Biden administration with the Nuclear Security Summit, the United States will prioritize results by galvanizing significant new country commitments in three areas: fighting corruption, defending against authoritarianism, and advancing human rights in their own nations and abroad. As a summit commitment of the United States, I will issue a presidential policy directive that establishes combating corruption as a core national security interest and democratic responsibility, and I will lead efforts internationally to bring transparency to the global financial system, go after illicit tax havens, seize stolen assets, and make it more difficult for leaders who steal from their people to hide behind anonymous front companies.

The Summit for Democracy will also include civil society organizations from around the world that stand on the frontlines in defense of democracy. And the summit members will issue a call to action for the private sector, including technology companies and social media giants, which must recognize their responsibilities and overwhelming interest in preserving democratic societies and protecting free speech. At the same time, free speech cannot serve as a license for technology and social media companies to facilitate the spread of malicious lies. Those companies must act to ensure that their tools and platforms are not empowering the surveillance state, gutting privacy, facilitating repression in China and elsewhere, spreading hate and misinformation, spurring people to violence, or remaining susceptible to other misuse.

## A FOREIGN POLICY FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS

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Second, my administration will equip Americans to succeed in the global economy—with a foreign policy for the middle class. To win the competition for the future against China or anyone else, the United States must sharpen its innovative edge and unite the economic might of democracies around the world to counter abusive economic practices and reduce inequality.

Economic security is national security. Our trade policy has to start at home, by strengthening our greatest asset—our middle class—and making sure that everyone can share in the success of the country, no matter one's race, gender, zip code, religion, sexual orientation, or disability. That will require enormous investments in our infrastructure—broadband, highways, rail, the energy grid, smart cities—and in education. We must give every student the skills necessary to obtain a good twenty-first-century job; make sure every single American has access to quality, affordable health care; raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour; and lead the clean economy revolution to create ten million good new jobs—including union jobs—in the United States.

I will make investment in research and development a cornerstone of my presidency, so that the United States is leading the charge in innovation. There is no reason we should be falling behind China or anyone else when it comes to clean energy, quantum computing, artificial intelligence, 5G, high-speed rail, or the race to end cancer as we know it. We have the greatest

research universities in the world. We have a strong tradition of the rule of law. And most important, we have an extraordinary population of workers and innovators who have never let our country down.

A foreign policy for the middle class will also work to make sure the rules of the international economy are not rigged against the United States—because when American businesses compete on a fair playing field, they win. I believe in fair trade. More than 95 percent of the world’s population lives beyond our borders—we want to tap those markets. We need to be able to build the very best in the United States and sell the very best around the world. That means taking down trade barriers that penalize Americans and resisting a dangerous global slide toward protectionism. That’s what happened a century ago, after World War I—and it exacerbated the Great Depression and helped lead to World War II.

The wrong thing to do is to put our heads in the sand and say no more trade deals. Countries will trade with or without the United States. The question is, Who writes the rules that govern trade? Who will make sure they protect workers, the environment, transparency, and middle-class wages? The United States, not China, should be leading that effort.

As president, I will not enter into any new trade agreements until we have invested in Americans and equipped them to succeed in the global economy. And I will not negotiate new deals without having labor and environmental leaders at the table in a meaningful way and without including strong enforcement provisions to hold our partners to the deals they sign.

China represents a special challenge. I have spent many hours with its leaders, and I understand what we are up against. China is playing the long game by extending its global reach, promoting its own political model, and investing in the technologies of the future. Meanwhile, Trump has designated imports from the United States’ closest allies—from Canada to the European Union—as national security threats in order to impose damaging and reckless tariffs. By cutting us off from the economic clout of our partners, Trump has kneecapped our country’s capacity to take on the real economic threat.



Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, December 2013  
POOL New / Reuters

The United States does need to get tough with China. If China has its way, it will keep robbing the United States and American companies of their technology and intellectual property. It will also keep using subsidies to give its state-owned enterprises an unfair advantage—and a leg up on dominating the technologies and industries of the future.

The most effective way to meet that challenge is to build a united front of U.S. allies and partners to confront China’s abusive behaviors and human rights violations, even as we seek to cooperate with Beijing on issues where our interests converge, such as climate change, nonproliferation, and global health security. On its own, the United States represents about a quarter of global GDP. When we join together with fellow democracies, our strength more than doubles. China can’t afford to ignore more than half the global economy. That gives us substantial leverage to shape the rules of the road on everything from the environment to labor, trade, technology, and transparency, so they continue to reflect democratic interests and values.

## BACK AT THE HEAD OF THE TABLE

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The Biden foreign policy agenda will place the United States back at the head of the table, in a position to work with its allies and partners to mobilize collective action on global threats. The world does not organize itself. For 70 years, the United States, under Democratic and Republican presidents, played a leading role in writing the rules, forging the agreements, and animating the institutions that guide relations among nations and advance collective security and prosperity—until Trump. If we continue his abdication of that responsibility, then one of two things will happen: either someone else will take the United States' place, but not in a way that advances our interests and values, or no one will, and chaos will ensue. Either way, that's not good for America.

American leadership is not infallible; we have made missteps and mistakes. Too often, we have relied solely on the might of our military instead of drawing on our full array of strengths. Trump's disastrous foreign policy record reminds us every day of the dangers of an unbalanced and incoherent approach, and one that defunds and denigrates the role of diplomacy.

I will never hesitate to protect the American people, including, when necessary, by using force. Of all the roles a president of the United States must fill, none is more consequential than that of commander in chief. The United States has the strongest military in the world, and as president, I will ensure it stays that way, making the investments necessary to equip our troops for the challenges of this century, not the last one. But the use of force should be the last resort, not the first. It should be used only to defend U.S. vital interests, when the objective is clear and achievable, and with the informed consent of the American people.

It is past time to end the forever wars, which have cost the United States untold blood and treasure. As I have long argued, we should bring the vast majority of our troops home from the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East and narrowly define our mission as defeating al Qaeda and the Islamic State (or ISIS). We should also end our support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen. We must maintain our focus on counterterrorism, around the world and at home, but staying entrenched in unwinnable conflicts drains our capacity to lead on other issues that require our attention, and it prevents us from rebuilding the other instruments of American power.



U.S. troops in Afghanistan, June 2011

Baz Ratner / Reuters

We can be strong and smart at the same time. There is a big difference between large-scale, open-ended deployments of tens of thousands of American combat troops, which must end, and using a few hundred Special Forces soldiers and intelligence assets to support local partners against a common enemy. Those smaller-scale missions are sustainable militarily, economically, and politically, and they advance the national interest.

Yet diplomacy should be the first instrument of American power. I am proud of what American diplomacy achieved during the Obama-Biden administration, from driving global efforts to bring the Paris climate agreement into force, to leading the international response to end the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, to securing the landmark multilateral deal to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Diplomacy is not just a series of handshakes and photo ops. It is building and tending relationships and working to identify areas of common interest while managing points of conflict. It requires discipline, a coherent

policymaking process, and a team of experienced and empowered professionals. As president, I will elevate diplomacy as the United States' principal tool of foreign policy. I will reinvest in the diplomatic corps, which this administration has hollowed out, and put U.S. diplomacy back in the hands of genuine professionals.

Diplomacy also requires credibility, and Trump has shattered ours. In the conduct of foreign policy, and especially in times of crisis, a nation's word is its most valuable asset. By pulling out of treaty after treaty, renegeing on policy after policy, walking away from U.S. responsibilities, and lying about matters big and small, Trump has bankrupted the United States' word in the world.

He has also alienated the United States from the very democratic allies it needs most. He has taken a battering ram to the NATO alliance, treating it like an American-run protection racket. Our allies should do their fair share, which is why I'm proud of the commitments the Obama-Biden administration negotiated to ensure that NATO members increase their defense spending (a move Trump now claims credit for). But the alliance transcends dollars and cents; the United States' commitment is sacred, not transactional. NATO is at the very heart of the United States' national security, and it is the bulwark of the liberal democratic ideal—an alliance of values, which makes it far more durable, reliable, and powerful than partnerships built by coercion or cash.

As president, I will do more than just restore our historic partnerships; I will lead the effort to reimagine them for the world we face today. The Kremlin fears a strong NATO, the most effective political-military alliance in modern history. To counter Russian aggression, we must keep the alliance's military capabilities sharp while also expanding its capacity to take on nontraditional threats, such as weaponized corruption, disinformation, and cybertheft. We must impose real costs on Russia for its violations of international norms and stand with Russian civil society, which has bravely stood up time and again against President Vladimir Putin's kleptocratic authoritarian system.

Working cooperatively with other nations that share our values and goals does not make the United States a chump. It makes us more secure and more successful. We amplify our own strength, extend our presence around the globe, and magnify our impact while sharing global responsibilities with willing partners. We need to fortify our collective capabilities with democratic friends beyond North America and Europe by reinvesting in our treaty alliances with Australia, Japan, and South Korea and deepening partnerships from India to Indonesia to advance shared values in a region that will determine the United States' future. We need to sustain our ironclad commitment to Israel's security. And we need to do more to integrate our friends in Latin America and Africa into the broader network of democracies and to seize opportunities for cooperation in those regions.

In order to regain the confidence of the world, we are going to have to prove that the United States says what it means and means what it says. This is especially important when it comes to the challenges that will define our time: climate change, the renewed threat of nuclear war, and disruptive technology.

The United States must lead the world to take on the existential threat we face—climate change. If we don't get this right, nothing else will matter. I will make massive, urgent investments at home that put the United States on track to have a clean energy economy with net-zero emissions by 2050. Equally important, because the United States creates only 15 percent of global emissions, I will leverage our economic and moral authority to push the world to determined action. I will rejoin the Paris climate agreement on day one of a Biden administration and then convene a summit of the world's major carbon emitters, rallying nations to raise their ambitions and push progress further and faster. We will lock in enforceable commitments that will reduce emissions in global shipping and aviation, and we will pursue strong measures to make sure other nations can't undercut the United States economically as we meet our own commitments. That includes insisting that China—the world's largest emitter of carbon—stop subsidizing coal exports and outsourcing pollution to other countries by financing billions of dollars' worth of dirty fossil fuel energy projects through its Belt and Road Initiative.

On nonproliferation and nuclear security, the United States cannot be a credible voice while it is abandoning the deals it negotiated. From Iran to North Korea, Russia to Saudi Arabia, Trump has made the prospect of nuclear proliferation, a new nuclear arms race, and even the use of nuclear weapons more likely. As president, I will renew our commitment to arms control for a new era. The historic Iran nuclear deal that the Obama-Biden administration negotiated blocked Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. Yet Trump rashly cast the deal aside, prompting Iran to restart its nuclear program and become more provocative, raising the risk of another disastrous war in the region. I'm under no illusions about the Iranian regime, which has engaged in destabilizing behavior across the Middle East, brutally cracked down on protesters at home, and unjustly detained Americans. But there is a smart way to counter the threat that Iran poses to our interests and a self-defeating way—and Trump has chosen the latter. The recent killing of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, removed a dangerous actor but also raised the prospect of an ever-escalating cycle of violence in the region, and it has prompted Tehran to jettison the nuclear limits established under the nuclear deal. Tehran must return to strict compliance with the deal. If it does so, I would rejoin the agreement and use our renewed commitment to diplomacy to work with our allies to strengthen and extend it, while more effectively pushing back against Iran's other destabilizing activities.

With North Korea, I will empower our negotiators and jump-start a sustained, coordinated campaign with our allies and others, including China, to advance our shared objective of a denuclearized North Korea. I will also pursue an extension of the New START treaty, an anchor of strategic stability between the United States and Russia, and use that as a foundation for new arms

control arrangements. And I will take other steps to demonstrate our commitment to reducing the role of nuclear weapons. As I [said](#) in 2017, I believe that the sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal should be deterring—and, if necessary, retaliating against—a nuclear attack. As president, I will work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with the U.S. military and U.S. allies.

When it comes to technologies of the future, such as 5G and artificial intelligence, other nations are [devoting national resources](#) to dominating their development and determining how they are used. The United States needs to do more to ensure that these technologies are used to promote greater democracy and shared prosperity, not to curb freedom and opportunity at home and abroad. For example, a Biden administration will join together with the United States' democratic allies to develop secure, private-sector-led 5G networks that do not leave any community, rural or low income, behind. As new technologies reshape our economy and society, we must ensure that these engines of progress are bound by [laws and ethics](#), as we have done at previous technological turning points in history, and avoid a race to the bottom, where the rules of the digital age are written by China and Russia. It is time for the United States to lead in forging a technological future that enables democratic societies to thrive and prosperity to be shared broadly.

These are ambitious goals, and none of them can be reached without the United States—flanked by fellow democracies—leading the way. We are facing adversaries, both externally and internally, hoping to exploit the fissures in our society, undermine our democracy, break up our alliances, and bring about the return of an international system where might determines right. The answer to this threat is more openness, not less: more friendships, more cooperation, more alliances, more democracy.

## PREPARED TO LEAD

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Putin wants to tell himself, and anyone else he can dupe into believing him, that the liberal idea is “obsolete.” But he does so because he is afraid of its power. No army on earth can match the way the electric idea of liberty passes freely from person to person, jumps borders, transcends languages and cultures, and supercharges communities of ordinary citizens into activists and organizers and change agents.

We must once more harness that power and rally the free world to meet the challenges facing the world today. It falls to the United States to lead the way. No other nation has that capacity. No other nation is built on that idea. We have to champion liberty and democracy, reclaim our credibility, and look with unrelenting optimism and determination toward our future.

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