As mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg lacks a concrete foreign policy record, and so he entered the presidential race as something of a blank slate. Perhaps to compensate for this lack of a record, he has made foreign policy speeches and numerous references to foreign policy in his campaign, leaning heavily on his military service.

Buttigieg’s foreign policy is much like the rest of his campaign: soaring, aspirational, hopeful rhetoric centered on generational change, but beneath its surface is a policy foundation that continues much of what was broken about the pre-Trump status quo.
The United States’s Role in the World

What we’re looking for: A progressive foreign policy rejects Trump-esque “America First” posturing in which alliances are annoyances, international institutions are burdens, and foreign policy is inherently zero-sum, oppositional, and transactional. A progressive foreign policy also avoids “American exceptionalism” framing, which fails to recognize the harm that some of the United States’s policies have done in the world (including policies instituted before Trump), and it does not view either the US’s permanent, global military hegemony as a prerequisite for a peaceful world, or the rise of other countries as an inherent threat.

Where Buttigieg stands: Buttigieg speaks about working multilaterally and investing in international relationships using diplomacy in furtherance of shared values. He condemns attempts by the United States to lecture other countries on human rights and corruption while Trump perpetuates abuses here at home.1 Contrary to his claims to represent generational change, his vision of foreign policy is deeply rooted in the toxic “American exceptionalism” that has been overwhelmingly rejected by his own generation, and he doesn’t grapple with harm that the US has done in the world long before Trump. Because of this, he has no serious plan to improve upon the pre-Trump status quo. Buttigieg frequently critiques Democrats for “not having a clear foreign policy of their own,”2 but his proposals are squarely within the centrist Democratic elite mainstream that he is criticizing.

He couches his foreign policy on the false premise that the US has a consistent history of benevolent hegemony that has only recently been dampened. “The greatest strategic advantage for America has always been the fact that our country has stood for values shared by humanity, touching aspirations felt far beyond our borders,” he said in a video on his campaign website. “However imperfectly, we have represented and defended principles of freedom and democracy that stir human beings wherever they live.”3 Buttigieg’s theory is that the world is in need of US “leadership” in order to solve global problems, and that rather than undoing decades of military interventionism and disruption caused by heavy-handed use of power, the next president’s primary responsibility is to “restore credibility”4 that Trump has eroded. As Buttigieg himself said: “My central purpose is to argue that the world today needs America more than ever—but only if America can be at her best.”

Bottom line: While Pete Buttigieg’s foreign policy vision is framed as hopeful and forward-looking, it takes this glowing view so far it reaches the point of being dishonest about our history and our present impact, and therefore, it fails to learn the lessons that would enable us to actually live up to these aspirational depictions. Buttigieg critiques the inevitable outcomes of the US role in the world that he is clearly deeply committed to preserving.

Threat Assessments

What we’re looking for: We want to see candidates take stock of and prioritize the security challenges facing the United States through a realistic lens that avoids fearmongering and/or inflating the level of actual threat. Candidates should prioritize by looking at physical, social, and economic threats holistically, and put people over power and profits. We want to see a recognition that many security challenges lack military solutions, and an acknowledgement that there are limits to US power.
**Where Buttigieg stands:** When Buttigieg talks about US foreign policy, he consistently frames his recommended approach as moving away from an era of endless war into a “foreign policy for the twenty-first century” focused on confronting rising authoritarianism, the “existential threat” of climate change, and domestic inequality and erosion of democracy.5

He does, however, call for “repealing and replacing” the counterterrorism authorization for the use of military force.6 That carefully worded phrase serves as a friendly signal to the hawkish foreign policy establishment; it invokes “replacement” legislation that has been previously introduced, which would institutionalize permanent, fruitless war. He has stated he would continue the CIA’s role in secretive paramilitary operations,7 which has contributed to significant civilian harm, inhibited public consent and oversight, and undermined stability around the world. All of this represents a view that inflates the threat that terrorism poses.

He also emphasizes Russia and China as top state-based threats to US security, and proposes focusing military spending on “countering their aggression.”8

**Bottom line:** Buttigieg generally avoids overt hawkish framing that inflates the threat to Americans posed by transnational terrorism, and he correctly recognizes key nonmilitary challenges facing US security. However it is disappointing that he leans into hawkish and confrontational stances toward Russia and China, and does not question or seek to meaningfully undo the post-9/11, forever-war paradigm.9

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**Investing in Military Dominance versus Other Tools**

**What we’re looking for:** The challenges facing the United States often lack military solutions, and prioritizing global military dominance at any cost is both harmful and unsustainable. A progressive budget would instead prioritize increasing the number of expert diplomats, expanding development programs that prevent conflict and reduce poverty, and fortifying peacebuilding institutions, rather than further inflating the already bloated Pentagon budget.

**Where Buttigieg stands:** Buttigieg rightly points out that strength is not the same thing as military power, and that the US can’t be truly secure unless it’s tending to the human needs of its people at home such as healthcare and education.9

But he doesn’t actually spell out a plan to build out soft-power capabilities, such as rebuilding the State Department. When he talks about the federal budget and military spending, he never says that the Pentagon budget should be cut. Instead, he says the more important question is how we spend our money within the existing astronomical Pentagon budget.10

Buttigieg’s preferred budget focuses on more advanced weapons systems including cyber tools, drones, and artificial intelligence.11 He also recommends aligning defense spending in order to confront Russia and China.12
Bottom line: Buttigieg’s budget doesn’t appear to align with his own assessments of challenges to national security, which are primarily of a nonmilitary nature. Furthermore, what he emphasizes the most is the need for new spending that would further enrich massive corporations within the defense industrial complex—making it unclear whether his priorities are being set based on the interests of the country or the interests of wealthy donors.

The Crisis in Yemen, and US Military Support to the Gulf States

What we’re looking for: A progressive consensus has emerged in favor of ending US military support for a bombing campaign as part of Yemen’s civil war. During the Obama administration, the US began to actively assist a coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, supplying them with intelligence, targeting assistance, refueling aircraft, and weapons sales.

All parties to this conflict, including the Saudi-led coalition as well as their enemies the Houthis, have committed war crimes against the civilian population. But US military support for the Saudis makes the United States directly complicit in their actions targeting civilians and blockading key ports, resulting in a mass famine, a spiraling civilian body count, a cholera outbreak, and currently the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. Congress has voted on a bipartisan basis to end US participation in Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen, and to halt arms sales to the Gulf states carrying out the atrocities. President Trump, however, has vetoed these efforts. At minimum, a progressive candidate would commit to end US complicity in this tragedy and similar atrocities in the future.

Where Buttigieg stands: Buttigieg unequivocally calls for an end to US participation in the Yemen conflict as well as an end to arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Even better, he applies his vision of a values-based foreign policy to arms sales more broadly, insisting that the US should be prepared to cease transfers to countries who cannot meet basic standards of human rights.

While he believes certain cooperation may be warranted with Saudi Arabia—such as intelligence sharing for counterterrorism purposes—he cautions against “sell[ing] our deepest values for the sake of fossil fuel access and lucrative business deals.”

Bottom line: Buttigieg’s human-rights-based stance on arms sales is among the strongest in the 2020 field, as is his commitment to ending complicity in Saudi war crimes.

Ending Endless Wars

What we’re looking for: The post-9/11 wars and global military operations have proven ineffective at reducing terrorism. They also seem to be endless, consuming trillions of dollars and tens of thousands of lives. A progressive candidate should explicitly recognize that there is no military solution to transnational groups that perpetuate terrorism, and should reflect the overwhelming consensus among the US public that these wars were a mistake.

Candidates should articulate clear, thoughtful plans for bringing the “Forever War” to an end. These plans should encompass not only ending US military interventions in places like Afghanistan and Syria but also halting the routine use of targeted strikes through drones and raids, and arming and training of proxy forces. Their plans should drastically limit the widespread covert operations of US special forces, and not simply replace active military operations with less-transparent covert operations or with private-sector mercenaries.
The plans should invest heavily in ensuring a stable and peaceful transition as those operations wind down, placing impacted civilian populations as a top priority through inclusive diplomatic negotiations and aid programs.

Candidates should also focus on fortifying the constitutionally mandated separation of war powers between the Executive Branch and Congress. Candidates should also work to increase transparency and democratic accountability over the future use of the US military.

Where Buttigieg stands: Buttigieg says that Americans “see leaders promise, again and again, to end the forever wars—only to fall short.” He is no different. His rhetoric on this issue does not match his actual policies. As a military veteran himself, Buttigieg speaks the language of ending endless war, decrying the cost in dollars, lives, and time. He heavily invokes his service in Afghanistan, and says he would support of withdrawing “combat troops” immediately, if elected. He says there should be a high bar for the use of force and an “exceedingly” high bar for using force unilaterally, and that there should be an “endgame” to conflicts and transparency in the objectives.

He critiques relying on unchecked, executive war powers for reasons as vague as “national interests,” and he interprets the powers more narrowly as only providing cover in the case of response to attack or imminent threat of attack. He also speaks strongly about protecting against civilian casualties not just as a moral responsibility but also a strategic advantage, and he advocates for investigations and accountability. These critiques are all correct, and often well-articulated.

Nonetheless, unlike many of his opponents, Buttigieg has not signed progressive veterans group Common Defense’s pledge to end forever war, despite extensive pressure. Neither does he appear prepared to truly end endless war: He supports leaving forces in Afghanistan after the supposed removal of combat troops, and he supports maintaining targeted counterterrorism operations and “security assistance” missions, policies our polling shows are overwhelmingly rejected by Democratic primary voters. He rightly identifies the danger of maintaining the overstretched global war authorization from 2001, but instead of supporting repealing it, he consistently hedges by saying he wants to “repeal and replace” it—language often used as code by the national security establishment for rewritten authorizations that cede even more warmaking power to the president. There is no need to “replace” the AUMF if he truly planned to end these wars.

Bottom line: Buttigieg has spoken extensively about the era of endless war, rhetorically tapped into the widespread public frustration, and tried to portray himself as a candidate of change—both substantive and generational.

Unfortunately, his actual policy vision represents a return to the broken status quo of the Washington, D.C., foreign policy establishment: less erratic and more eloquent than Donald Trump, but no less deadly for the troops he would continue sending into combat, and the civilians around the world that his policies would impact.

Russia and China

What we’re looking for: Progressive candidates should reject the framing that the rise of Russia and China requires a response akin to a new Cold War, a ramped-up “great-power competition” for unquestioned global military dominance at any cost, or a zero-sum diplomatic approach hostile to targeted cooperation with either state. Human rights abuses and other violations of international norms should not be ignored, but we’d like to see candidates recognize that there is no military solution to these challenges.

Instead, progressive candidates should offer solutions such as diplomatic cooperation to create pressure and incentives through multilateral mechanisms. Candidates’ proposed solutions should primarily focus
on domestic investments and on opportunities for transnational partnership in order to jointly address existential, shared global challenges (climate change, nuclear weapons).

Progressive candidates should also recognize that the challenges that Russia and China pose are unique and context specific. In the case of Russia, the primary security challenge to the US consists of disinformation and election interference, like what took place in 2016, as well as the country’s willingness to wage asymmetric warfare, such as in Crimea. In the case of China, the primary security challenge is the increasingly totalitarian nature of the regime and its willingness to weaponize technology and economic resources to the detriment of human rights and human dignity, both inside and beyond its borders.

**Where Buttigieg stands:** Much of Buttigieg’s rhetoric echoes toxic, Cold War–esque “great-power competition” framing, with the “American way” competing against the growing influence of Russia and China. Despite this, he does recommend many nonmilitary solutions. He encourages cooperation with Russia and China on areas of mutual concern, such as climate disruption, and he recognizes the importance of investing domestically in order to compete globally. He also favors working diplomatically and multilaterally to address concerning behaviors.

However, Buttigieg admits he’s “more hawkish” in this area than others in his party, and he does appear to favor a military buildup to confront China and Russia by “maintain[ing] investments in a military that can deter aggression and adventurism,” and by strategizing against potential cyberattacks and proxy wars.

**Bottom line:** When Buttigieg talks about ending endless wars, he seems to envision maintaining a behemoth global military presence, just with newer weapons and an eye toward shifting US military focus from the Middle East to confronting Russia and China—an approach that our polling has shown the overwhelming majority of Democratic primary voters reject.

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### Venezuela

**What we’re looking for:** Mindful both of the crisis unfolding in Venezuela as well as the ugly history of US interventions in Latin America, progressives are looking to presidential candidates to first do no harm. This means recognizing that US options in Venezuela are not “war or nothing,” that a US military intervention will only make things worse, that broad-based sanctions harm the most vulnerable while empowering the Maduro regime, and that there are numerous steps that the US can and should take to help Venezuelans. Most importantly, it means recognizing that the only viable path out of the current crisis is a negotiated process that leads to free and fair elections, allowing Venezuelans themselves to choose their own leaders.

**Where Buttigieg stands:** Though Buttigieg has joined the Trump administration in recognizing opposition leader Juan Guaidó as the rightful president of Venezuela, Buttigieg has also denounced military action to violently impose that regime change in Venezuela, and later, he expressed support for a negotiated solution. He has warned that increased sectoral sanctions will increase the suffering of the Venezuelan people, though he is not opposed to targeted sanctions against individuals within Maduro’s inner circle. Buttigieg points to humanitarian solutions including increasing regional aid to address root causes as well as offering Temporary Protected Status to Venezuelans inside the United States.

**Bottom line:** It’s good that Buttigieg recognizes that US options in Venezuela aren’t “war or nothing,” and that he explicitly condemns military intervention. Even better is that he proposes humanitarian and democratic solutions, though it is inconsistent with his public support for the Trump administration’s harmful decision to immediately recognize Guaidó as president.
North Korea

What we're looking for: Democrats often fail to express a principled, progressive plan for diplomacy with North Korea. Candidates should reject framing that diplomacy is a gift or a concession to North Korea, should recognize how dangerous a military clash would be, and should commit not to strike North Korea first but instead to embrace a sustained, long-term path of diplomacy and peace, including by formally ending the Korean War.

Where Buttigieg stands: Buttigieg has embraced a realistic, step-by-step process toward peace and denuclearization on the Korean peninsula. In a campaign video, he said, “Rather than a zero-sum insistence on full and complete denuclearization before any peace is possible, we can recognize that the two processes can be mutually reinforcing, with small steps leading to bigger ones.”

However, he has declined to commit to meeting with Kim Jong-un without precondition, and has said he would “minimize one-on-one engagement” with authoritarian leaders.

Bottom line: Buttigieg recognizes the necessity of weaving peace into the long-term work of denuclearization. He has overall outlined a good approach on North Korea, but occasionally, he echoes the anti-diplomacy tropes favored by those who prefer continued military confrontation.

Iran

What we're looking for: At minimum, we want to see candidates commit both to reentering the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiated by President Obama, which Donald Trump violated, and to declare that they will not start a war with Iran. Furthermore, candidates should not repeat right-wing talking points that criticize the JCPOA deal as “flawed,” or inaccurately assert that Iran “has” or is “actively developing” nuclear weapons.

Progressive candidates will realistically assess the challenges posed by Iran, and recognize that only diplomacy can succeed in addressing those challenges, with the JCPOA representing a successful model of international cooperation.

Where Buttigieg stands: Buttigieg has pledged to reenter the Iran nuclear deal, though he often speaks of it as “imperfect”—an unhelpful talking point that conflates unrelated issues with the deal’s narrow and effective focus on nuclear weapons, and undermines the deal. He favors continued multilateral engagement and diplomacy in order to build upon the deal. He’s warned against the similarities between this administration’s escalations with Iran and the run-up to the Iraq War, and he has rightfully called out the unprecedented destruction that would result from a war with Iran. He’s also made some insightful comments on the domestic politics of Iran and how US policy has tended to empower the hardliners and undermine the moderates.

Bottom line: Buttigieg’s commitment not to start a new war with Iran is welcome, as is his acknowledgment that diplomacy is the only path forward, but it’s disappointing that he characterizes the original deal as flawed.

Corruption and the Military-Industrial Complex

What we’re looking for: Progressives recognize that the military-industrial complex, like any other sector of entrenched corporate power, has an undue influence in our politics, our foreign policy, and our framework of national security decision-making. Candidates should recognize this as well, and articulate specific reforms to combat corruption, revolving doors, lobbying influence, corporate welfare, and be willing to take on the power of the defense
industry in the same way they’d take on sectors like Wall Street.

**Where Buttigieg stands (And also bottom line):** Beyond critiquing the monied interests that benefit from current dealings with Saudi Arabia, Buttigieg does not appear to have tackled the subject of corruption in the defense industry, nor has he unveiled a plan to limit its influence over foreign policy.

**Nuclear Weapons**

**What we’re looking for:** Progressive candidates should enthusiastically support US participation in key arms-control agreements, including extending the New START treaty and reentering the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. They should also embrace a “No First Use” policy, meaning they’ll commit to use nuclear weapons only to deter nuclear attacks on the US or its allies. They should also support reducing the role of nuclear weapons in US foreign policy, and reject the development of new nuclear weapons.

**Where Buttigieg stands:** Buttigieg has identified preventing the spread of nuclear weapons as a core component of US foreign policy, but he has declined to embrace a “No First Use” policy and/or to commit to extending or rejoining key agreements.

**Bottom line:** There’s not much to work with here. Buttigieg has yet to flesh out his vision of US nuclear policy, and it’s disappointing that he’s specifically answered in the negative when asked to embrace No First Use.

**The Muslim Ban, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers**

**What we’re looking for:** It should be a top priority for a progressive president to repeal Trump’s Muslim, asylum, and refugee bans—but that’s not enough. A progressive president should live up to America’s aspirational values and undo nearly a century of xenophobic policies by moving to increase refugee resettlements (particularly among refugee populations directly created by US policy), support reforms that significantly streamline the asylum process, ensure there are no such similar bans in the future, and make direct connections to the US policy decisions framed around “national security” that have systematically demonized Muslims and people of color as inherently suspect and threatening.

Progressive candidates should call out Trump and the Republican Party’s racist “divide-and-conquer” tactics that falsely paint immigrants and refugees as the reason for voters’ problems, in order to distract from the real causes. The candidate should recognize that US foreign policy is deeply intertwined with US immigration policy, and work to make the US a more welcoming nation while also working to create a more peaceful, stable world where fewer people are forced to flee their homes.

**Where Buttigieg stands:** Buttigieg has pledged to rescind the Muslim ban, and to raise refugee-admissions targets to 100,000. He has also spoken in favor of increasing US aid to address the root causes of migration, such as corruption and poverty.

**Bottom line:** Buttigieg meets the baseline here, but he doesn’t appear to connect the dots to how post-9/11 policies have demonized Muslims and immigrants, and laid the foundation for current cruel policies.
Civil Liberties and Human Rights in National Security Policy

What we’re looking for: The US’s approach to national security following 9/11 has produced numerous human rights and civil liberties abuses, from torture and surveillance to racial profiling and indefinite detention. Progressive candidates should propose specific reforms to end these abuses, and roll back infringements on rights in the name of security, particularly those disproportionately impacting marginalized communities.

Where Buttigieg stands: Buttigieg has called for a balancing of security interests with rights and liberties,51 and he has affirmed that he believes torture is unlawful.52 He’s also committed to close the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay,53 and he has spoken out against warrantless wiretapping of Americans inside the US.54

Bottom line: Buttigieg has said more on this issue than many others in the field, even though he hasn’t put forward the clear plans that will be necessary in order to take on the post-9/11 security state.

Climate Security

What we’re looking for: Progressives recognize climate change as an existential national security threat, and want candidates to articulate a plan to confront this threat with the scope and urgency that it requires. This is particularly important because the US, and in particular the US military, makes a disproportionately large contribution to carbon emissions.

There is a direct line from the effects of climate change—droughts, crop failures, land loss, desertification, animal extinctions, and increasingly frequent severe weather and natural disasters—to a growing amount of unrest and instability around the world. These disruptions have already led to violent conflict, and unrest will continue to get worse. Climate refugees will be forced to seek new homes, resulting in unprecedented levels of migration. Melting arctic ice has exposed previously buried natural resources, setting off competition among different nations to secure them—a competition that could easily escalate into war. Up to this point, the US has responded to the spiraling level of conflict and instability by fortifying and militarizing its borders, growing its armed forces, and intervening in fragile countries around the world while investing trillions of taxpayer dollars into the increasingly difficult task of maintaining global military dominance.

A progressive candidate should recognize that climate change is both the greatest threat to the safety and prosperity of the US, and the global issue that the US has the greatest power to mitigate. A progressive candidate should recognize that the growing militarization of our society has things exactly backward: It’s a fruitless effort to adapt to the symptoms, instead of treating the rapidly worsening disease.

A progressive candidate should have a serious and detailed plan to prevent further climate change. This should include not only a domestic plan but also a framework for a global Green New Deal, reentering and significantly building upon the Paris Agreement, supporting the UN Green Climate Fund, and recognizing the crucial impact that the current size, structure, and role of the US military has in fueling the climate crisis.55
**Where Buttigieg stands:** Buttigieg has identified climate change as an existential threat and a multiplier of other security challenges.⁵⁶ He’s backed the Green New Deal resolution and proposed a plan to get to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, but his plans are less robust than many other candidates in the field.⁵⁷ Globally, he’s committed to rejoining the Paris Agreement and doubling US commitments to the UN Green Climate Fund.⁵⁸ Interestingly, he’s proposed hosting a “Pittsburgh summit” of cities to form commitments in parallel with the Paris targets.

**Bottom line:** Buttigieg has a detailed plan to confront climate change and recognizes the security threat it poses, but he fails to connect the role that militarism plays in fueling the climate crisis.
ENDNOTES

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DESIGNED BY BILLIE KANFER
billiekk13@gmail.com