OVERVIEW

Former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Julián Castro’s campaign has centered on immigration and racial justice. In keeping with that theme he has taken some strong progressive positions on foreign policy when it comes to re-thinking the US relationship to Latin America and deconstructing anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant policies crafted in the name of a misguided view of national security.
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 Castro stands: When asked directly about his foreign policy priorities, Castro offered a defense of the post-WWII international order, and pledged to strengthen international partnerships and institutions. He also said he wants to see the US taking a leadership role on human rights, and warned against entanglements like the Iraq War.

Bottom line: Despite having few detailed foreign policy proposals, Castro puts forward a vision of global engagement and cooperation, with US leadership focused on diplomacy and development, though he primarily identifies Trump-era policies as the problem with achieving that vision.

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 Castro stands: When asked directly about the top challenges to US security, Castro named China and climate change. He’s also pointed to inequality, mass migration, cybersecurity and the rise of authoritarianism. He’s offered solutions involving diplomacy and development on these subjects. He’s also decried US entanglements in wars.

Bottom line: Castro hasn’t made a foreign policy speech or issued a written plan on the matter, so it’s difficult to piece together his vision on US engagement in the world. But when directly asked, he hasn’t echoed fear-based threat inflation on the campaign trail, and that’s great to see.

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 Castro stands (and bottom line): Castro has talked about the need to invest in peacebuilding institutions, such as the State Department and USAID, in order to prevent conflicts before they occur, but
he has also echoed rhetoric about a “readiness crisis” at the Pentagon, which ignores its already bloated budget. He hasn’t put forward a plan to realign US investments.

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 Castro stands: Castro has pledged to end US participation in the Saudi-led war in Yemen, saying that the US “must continue to assess our relationship with Saudi Arabia given [Khashoggi’s murder], including US support for the Saudi war in Yemen.” He has noted the lack of accountability for Saudi behaviors, and called for an end to US military support.

Bottom line: Castro is one of the only candidates not to put forward a clear plan to end US 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.

Their 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 Castro stands:** Castro has said that he’s “not a big fan” of recent American military commitments, including in Iraq and Syria, and he has signed veterans group Common Defense’s plan to end forever war. He has both said that there wouldn’t be combat troops in Afghanistan at the end of his first term, and also that he would conduct a withdrawal in a “responsible” way that ensures a stable transition by means ofinclusive negotiations that include the Afghan government and women. He’s also condemned Congress’ abdication of its warmaking responsibilities and the wide-ranging global war authorization.

However, Castro hasn’t indicated whether the US should continue targeted strikes or leave residual forces in Afghanistan or the Middle East. Neither has he indicated the extent to which he supports repeal of current authorities and restoring warmaking powers to Congress.

**Bottom line:** Castro’s commitment to wind down current wars is welcome, though we’d like to see a more fleshed-out plan to end the endless wars, and to prevent further expansion of presidential war powers.

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**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 Castro stands:** Castro identified China as a top threat, but he appears not to have explicitly indicated support for a military buildup in response. He’s talked about strengthening alliances and investing in international economic development in order to compete globally.

Castro has also indicated support for increased military engagement to confront Russian aggression.

**Bottom line:** There is little to draw from in piecing together Castro’s approach on Russia and China, but there are concerning, hawkish elements in his rhetoric.

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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 Castro stands: While Castro has said military action should be used in “last resort,” he said initially that he doesn’t think it’s appropriate for Venezuela “right now.” But he has gone on to state that there is no military solution in Venezuela. He has also spoken in favor of lifting sanctions that hurt the people of Venezuela, ensuring that Venezuelans choose their own leader, working with allies to provide aid, and extending Temporary Protected Status to Venezuelans in the United States.

Bottom line: While it’s encouraging that Castro has recognized that US options in Venezuela aren’t “war or nothing, and that he’s put forward positive humanitarian proposals, it’s troubling that he hasn’t fully removed military invasion from the table.

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 Castro stands: Though Castro has said that peace negotiations should be supported in the national interest, no matter who is president, he’s also slammed Trump for “radically meet[ing]” with Kim Jong-un and “elevating the profile” of the North Korean leader. While he has indicated support for incremental deals with North Korea, he has not indicated that a peace agreement should be put on the table as part of those negotiations.

Bottom line: Castro hasn’t put forward a positive alternative vision for diplomacy with North Korea, and has repeated hawkish tropes in his critique of Trump’s approach.

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 Castro stands (and bottom line): Castro hits the baseline progressive points on Iran, as he’s warned against a new war with Iran, and urged de-escalation of tensions. He’s also pledged to reenter the JCPOA.

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 Castro stands (and bottom line): Castro doesn’t appear to have broached the topic of the military-industrial complex and its undue influence on US national security 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 Castro stands (and bottom line): Castro has called for working toward a world free of the threat of nuclear weapons, and to live up to INF and New START Treaty commitments as part of that work.29 hasn’t put forward clear positions on nuclear weapons.29

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 Castro stands: Castro has pledge to rescind Trump’s Muslim and refugee bans,30 and to increase refugee-resettlement targets to at least 110,000.31 Even better, he’s put forward a framework for a twenty-first-century Marshall plan focused on Central America, to address the root causes driving migration by treating the directly impacted countries as equal partners.32 He’s also cautioned against the US repeating its “checkered history” in the region,33 and he’s identified extended anti-Muslim animus that’s driven fear-based policies.34 He has stated that the US to be a “place of refuge” for the world.35
Bottom line: This is an area of real strength for Castro, and his leadership is important in the field.

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 Castro stands (and bottom line): Castro has noted that post-9/11 policy has been tinged with nativism and nationalism along with open-ended conflicts, and urged a commitment to human rights. Castro doesn’t appear to have talked about the post-9/11 security state and its impact on rights and liberties.

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.

Where Castro stands: Castro has identified climate change as a top security challenge to the US, and pledged to reenter the Paris Agreement. He’s also pledged to conduct multilateral diplomacy to strengthen the agreement, and has put forward a domestic climate plan with a target of net-zero carbon emissions by 2045.

Bottom line: Castro’s plans recognize the urgency of the crisis, and are thorough, if not as ambitious as those of some of his competitors in the field. Unfortunately, he doesn’t take on US militarism as part of his vision, a critical component to moving to a green economy.
ENDNOTES

11. https://commondefense.us/end-the-forever-war/
13. NYT; https://www.cfr.org/article/julian-castro