While tech entrepreneur Andrew Yang has a number of progressive positions regarding the role of the United States in the world, foreign policy doesn’t appear to be a high priority for him. Consequently, while his instincts largely lean in the right direction, he lacks a specific vision and concrete plans for how to rethink US security policies.
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 Yang stands:** Yang explicitly resists the nationalist withdrawal from global engagement of the Trump era, speaking in favor of strong alliances and global cooperation. He frames such relationships as beneficial and not burdens to the US. He identifies “restraint” as a top priority, urging that the US can incur “terrible cost” to itself and others when it oversteps. He concludes that “while America has undoubtedly made mistakes, we’ve been a positive force in world history, leading to the spread of peace, prosperity, and democracy.”

**Bottom line:** Yang’s rejection of “America First” isolationism, embrace of global community, and simultaneous support of restraint makes his view of the US role in the world quite progressive, though lacking in detail. That said, Yang’s emphasis on domestic issues and lack of experience in international affairs signal that reshaping US foreign policy could be a low priority for him.

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 Yang stands:** Yang takes a realistic and clear-eyed view of national security challenges. He doesn’t echo harmful, post-9/11 war paradigm tropes, and he goes beyond some of his colleagues by saying the rise of China “isn’t a direct threat to the United States.” While he does identify Russia as the greatest geopolitical threat, he focuses more heavily on confronting white nationalism and climate change.

**Bottom line:** Yang’s reluctance to lean into hawkish tropes about China or terrorism is refreshing, as is his recognition that most challenges to the US are those without military solutions.

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 Yang stands: Yang appears to reject the goal of global military dominance. He speaks sometimes about the need to “reassess” and modernize military spending. Elsewhere, he commits to specific cuts to the Pentagon budget, being one of the only candidates to identify a specific dollar amount to cut so far. Even better, he cites the need to reallocate investments in domestic human needs, such as public health, infrastructure, jobs, and alleviating poverty.

Yang commits to bolstering diplomacy spending, but he doesn’t outline a specific plan for rebuilding the State Department. At times, he seems to be suggesting more spending on modernized weapons systems.

Bottom line: Yang’s innovative proposals to reallocate Pentagon money are welcome, though inconsistent. He should apply the same specificity to his plans to rebuild diplomatic capabilities to end and prevent the wars he has spoken out against.

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 Yang stands (and also bottom line): Yang deserves credit for unequivocally calling for ending all support, including arms sales, to the Saudi-led war in Yemen.

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 Yang stands:** Yang has signed progressive veterans group Common Defense’s pledge to end forever wars, and cited it in the first two televised debates. He’s urged an end to current conflicts and acknowledged the harm they’ve done in the world. He’s pledged to repeal the endless war authorization, and to refrain from unauthorized military force in the future, except in “emergency” scenarios.

He’s said the US should be “much more open” in disclosing civilian casualties resulting from our lethal operations abroad, and should cease labelling certain areas “active hostility” zones as justification to authorize more force. He’s also committed to using executive authority to prohibit the CIA from carrying out drone strikes, instead of the military.

However, Yang has hesitated to say that troops would come home from Afghanistan within his first term. He’s also appeared careful to specify that he supports the removal of “combat troops,” and the continued involvement in order to protect women and girls and guard against terrorist safe havens. He does emphasize a preference for diplomatic engagement and economic development to accomplish these goals.

**Bottom line:** Yang is consistent in reiterating his opposition to endless war, and that’s important. But he doesn’t appear to have thought through a clear plan to actually end them, particularly when it comes to targeted operations.

---

**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 Yang stands:** Yang has declined to embrace some of the hawkish rhetoric of his fellow candidates, explicitly rejecting the idea that China is a direct threat to the US. He believes competition with China should involve strength at home and cooperative, peaceful engagement in the world, focused on economic development initiatives.
However, he does list Russia as the top geopolitical threat to the US, and express support for working with NATO to expand “security cooperation” to counter Russian aggression.

**Bottom line:** Yang’s overall posture largely avoids hawkish framing when it comes to China—it’s too bad he falls into it on Russia. It would also be great to see him embrace targeted cooperation with both nations in support of his plans to confront climate change.

### 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 Yang stands:** Yang says the US “should not be in the business of regime change,” and opposes military action to remove Maduro, but does recognize opposition leader Juan Guaidó as the interim president of Venezuela. Nonetheless, he’s recognized that broad-based sanctions hurt the people of Venezuela and recommended increased humanitarian aid.

**Bottom line:** Yang’s humanitarian plans toward Venezuela aren’t very fleshed out, but it’s heartening to see him reject military force. Even better would be if he tied his warning to lessons learned from past US interventions.

### 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 Yang stands:** Yang hasn’t echoed some of his competitors’ knee-jerk anti-diplomacy talking points, instead saying that talks are a good thing. He’s also committed to meet with Kim Jong-un without preconditions, and has embraced a realistic, step-by-step approach as opposed to “all or nothing” dealing, which is doomed to fail.

**Bottom line:** Yang has great things to say about diplomacy to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis. It would also be great to hear him commit to ending the unresolved Korean War in order to avoid a new one.

### 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 Yang stands: Yang has clearly opposed a new armed conflict with Iran, warning that it “would lead to another multi-decade engagement that would spread throughout the region and have no clear benefit for the American people.” He’s pointed to the need to de-escalate with Iran, and tied current tensions to the decision of the Trump administration to violate the JCPOA.

He’s pledged to rejoin the nuclear deal if elected, although he wants to renegotiate the timelines to make up for time lost by Trump and Bolton’s sabotage of the deal. He recognizes that it is the foundation for further negotiations to address other Iranian behaviors.

Bottom line: Yang’s Iran comments show that he understands that de-escalation diplomacy is the only path to success with Iran.

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 Yang stands (and bottom line): We can’t find indication that Yang has acknowledged the excessive power of the defense industry in national security policy, or put forward proposals to curb its corruption.

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 Yang stands: Yang hasn’t said much about nuclear weapons, but he’s spoken strongly against the president having sole authority to decide when to launch them, and has indicated support for a No First Use policy.

Bottom line: Yang appears to have good instincts when it comes to nuclear policy, but he should flesh out his plans further in order to have a truly progressive player on the issue.

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 Yang stands:

Yang doesn’t appear to have explicitly committed to rescinding Trump’s Muslim ban if elected. He has indicated support for increasing refugee resettlements, but he has not committed to a specific number. Yang has also talked about the role that US humanitarian aid plays in the Northern Triangle to address the root causes of migration.

He does get lots of credit for also acknowledging that US bombing campaigns are contributing to destabilization and the migration crisis.

Bottom line: Though Yang wisely ties the issues of migration to US foreign policy, he fails to articulate even baseline plans on the issue. Also, failing to unambiguously pledge to undo the Muslim ban if elected is unacceptable—he must fix this at once.

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 Yang stands (and bottom line): This is another area where Yang hasn’t said much. He has said that torture wouldn’t be “allowed” under his presidency, but he hasn’t affirmed that it is illegal and not a mere policy choice. It’s a big blind spot for him that needs filled, since truly ending endless war also means protecting the rights violated in the name of national security.

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.43

Where Yang stands: Yang has called climate change an “existential threat,” and put forward a plan to achieve a fully green economy by 2050,44 which is less ambitious than many of his competitors for the Democratic nomination.45 He’s also urged international cooperation to confront the threat of the climate crisis, including by rejoining the Paris Agreement and strengthening the targets.46 He hasn’t exactly laid out a plan to utilize US economic development for climate security (such as funding the UN Green Climate Fund), but he has proposed the unusual step of repurposing the military to offer stabilization assistance globally to regions particularly impacted by the climate crisis.47

Bottom line: While Yang appears to understand the gravity of the climate crisis and the necessity of international cooperation to confront it, he hasn’t meaningfully implemented foreign policy into his plans or factored in how US military policy intersects with the issue. Further, his proposal to direct the Pentagon to take action risks militarizing the response.
Yang’s proposal would include a bizarrely-named “Legion of Builders and Destroyers” funded by reallocated militarism money to complete domestic infrastructure projects.