

## DEFENSE AND FOREIGN POLICY IN THE US DEMOCRATIC PARTY PLATFORM 2020

Email Exchange between Sean Howard, Cape Breton Spectator, and Matt Korda,  
Federation of American Scientists

September 2020

### 1. Process: Window Dressing or New Vision?

**Sean Howard (SH):** Writing in *The Atlantic* on May 20 ('Even a Bolder Biden Will Only Go So Far'), Peter Beinart noted with dismay that the six 'unity task forces' agreed by the Biden and Sanders campaigns did not include foreign policy. "That's a pity," Beinart wrote, "because America's relationship with the world needs dramatic rethinking too." True, as Beinart noted, numerous defense and foreign policy working groups were established, with "hundreds of wonks, who produce reams of documents, which are sent to top Biden advisers": but they "don't wield much power; one former Obama-administration official characterized them to me as 'window dressing.'" Yet after the Platform was released, Sanders' senior foreign policy advisor Matt Duss reacted (in *The Intercept*, July 22) in a way suggesting 'his side' had been part of the team, and had been taken seriously: "There's a lot to celebrate here, both in terms of where the party is moving on these issues, and of a broader unifying vision for the country."

How do you evaluate the process established to debate and draft the foreign and defense policy portions of the Platform? Did it seem genuinely inclusive of progressive groups and perspectives, and thus open to a genuine review of fundamental questions? As a related question, how much did foreign and defence policy seem to *matter* – rank as a priority, for both the Biden and 'Bernie' wings – in the overall drafting process?

**Matt Korda (MK):** I was certainly disappointed to learn that the Biden-Sanders "unity" task forces did not include foreign policy – especially given all of the incredible groundwork that has been laid over the past few years to move US foreign policy in a more progressive direction. I am confident that if a foreign policy task force of this kind had been created, the subsequent recommendations to the Platform would have been very positive. Perhaps we would have seen more concrete commitments on cutting defense spending, or more a serious interrogation of longstanding US nuclear posture. And while there are certainly some things worth celebrating in the Platform (for example, committing to ending the war in Yemen), it seems that this deliberate decision to not create a foreign policy task force is a signal that progressives will have a difficult time exerting influence over a Biden administration's foreign policy.

However, I don't think that the Democratic foreign policy establishment will be able to ignore progressive voices for much longer. Not only are voting Democrats well to the left of their elected politicians in Congress when it comes to foreign policy, but we are also seeing the rise and *success* of progressive candidates – such as Jamaal Bowman in New York – who are running on explicit anti-war platforms. A more restrained foreign policy is clearly a winning strategy, and it's already mainstream thinking in the American public; now we just need our elected officials to catch up.

## 2. An End to Forever Wars – but a War Machine Forever?

**SH:** The need to “end forever wars” is repeatedly stressed in the Platform: together with the logical corollary that diplomacy and aid should replace war as “America’s tool of first resort,” this seems to be the major ‘rallying cry’ around which all Democratic factions can unite. Yet it is also stressed that “Democrats believe the United States military should be the best-trained, best-equipped, and most effective fighting force in the world,” one indeed that would be more “agile, flexible, and resilient,” able to “operate” – and, presumably, ‘prevail’ – “in more contested environments” (including space?). And it would do this in a more “cost effective” way, “for less” funding – though how much less is not suggested.

What has the progressive reaction been – and what is your own reaction – to this effort to maintain America’s global military pre-eminence while working to reduce the frequency, and de-emphasize the role, of war in foreign policy? What *is* the vision here, that endless wars are ended, only to be replaced by periodic wars that are more effectively fought and won? Or is a deeper, more radical vision – of an America no longer captive to, or defined by, its War Machine – hidden between the lines of a compromise text?

**MK:** You’ve correctly identified a bizarre contradiction that’s present in both the Platform, as well as in Beltway foreign policy thinking overall. The DC “blob” has accurately assessed that the American public is generally tired of endless wars, and yet the establishment seems unwilling to imagine a vision of American foreign policy that does not present the United States military as a force for good in the world. So we’re left with this somewhat inconsistent Democratic Platform that preaches an end to endless wars, while simultaneously making no actual commitment to reduce Pentagon spending or the global role of the US military – the Biden team even admits that in some areas, military investment could actually increase. Without resolving these clear inconsistencies, it is difficult to expect much change in the overall direction of US foreign policy, even if Trump is voted out of office.

## 3. Still the Missing Link? Modern War and Climate Change

**SH:** The Platform argues that “the implications of climate change for national security and the Department of Defense can no longer be an afterthought, but must be at the core of all policy and operational plans to secure our vital interests.” What is your understanding of what this actually means? On one level, this follows on from the last question, for maintaining a massive American War Machine means sustaining the Pentagon as a major polluter and emitter of greenhouse gases – both at home and abroad, in war and ‘peace’ – whereas an agenda of deep demilitarization would free up the vast funds needed for remediation, decontamination, and investments in a Green New Deal.

More fundamentally, there is the existential consideration of the intolerable threat to the global climate posed by nuclear war: by the weapons at the heart of US foreign and defense policy for the past 75 years. Some anti-nuclear activists believe that reframing the issue of nuclear disarmament in this way is not only scientifically sound and intellectually justified but a strategically astute attempt to broaden and deepen the climate justice movement. Nowhere in the Platform, however – in either the defense and foreign policy or climate change sections – is such a reframing attempted. As both a (young) anti-nuclear and climate justice activist, do you have any

sense or hope that the profound linkages between the twin existential threats of our time will help shape and inform the debate moving forward?

**MK:** It is certainly encouraging to see that the Democratic Platform appears to recognize the links between climate change and national security; however, with regards to phrases like this, I worry that foreign policy thinkers are learning the wrong lessons. The Pentagon is the single largest institutional emitter of fossil fuels on the planet, and therefore a sincere effort to combat climate change will necessarily require an element of demilitarization. Efforts to “greenify” the military are insufficient. Serious first steps towards demilitarization would include buying fewer weapons, closing superfluous overseas bases, bringing troops home, and conducting fewer overseas missions or exercises – but these will be met with fierce resistance, as this would constitute a fundamental—but ultimately necessary – reversal in US foreign policy.

I would absolutely agree with your assessment that reframing nuclear policy as a climate justice issue is both accurate and strategically prudent. There are several grassroots groups in the nuclear policy space that have been organizing on these grounds for many years, and one can increasingly see that diplomats from non-nuclear-armed states are now prepared to consider nuclear disarmament as an environmental justice imperative, in addition to the more commonly-used framings of disarmament as humanitarian or security imperatives. This certainly gives me hope that as more and more international pressure builds to combat climate change, that pressure will also expand to include considerations of demilitarization and disarmament.

#### **4. Nuclear Weapons: No First Use?**

**SH:** The Platform unequivocally states that “the sole purpose of our nuclear arsenals should be to deter – and, if necessary, retaliate against – a nuclear attack,” adding that “we will work...with our allies and the military” to adjust US nuclear posture and doctrine accordingly. This stance seems a marked improvement on the tepid formula in President Barack Obama’s 2010 Nuclear Posture Review which stated that the US “would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners,” implying a preparedness to ‘go nuclear’ first, and not only to pre-empt a nuclear attack.

Do you agree with this interpretation, and do you think the logic of the Platform position is the adoption by a Biden Administration of a No-First-Use policy? Certainly the Platform’s rejection of the Trump Administration’s “new nuclear weapons” – primarily envisaged as assisting the US to ‘credibly’ threaten, fight and ‘win’ a ‘limited’ nuclear war – would help set the stage for NFU, as would the removal of US ‘tactical’ weapons from 5 NATO countries in Europe. But would you agree that a far more substantive move in the direction of NFU would be a declaration of intent not to replace, and progressively phase-out, the ICBM ‘leg’ of the triad (the weapons most likely, because of their vulnerability, to be used first in any crisis or conflict)? As you have recently reported, such a move would be likely to command broad bipartisan support, so were you surprised as well as disappointed that there was no commitment in the Platform to a post-triad posture?

**MK:** I was encouraged to see the Platform explicitly state that the purpose of US nuclear weapons was for deterrence, and not for warfighting. I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a no-first-use policy, as this would require both a more specific declaratory statement and, more crucially, a serious

restructuring of the US nuclear arsenal. As you correctly point out, even if the United States suddenly declared a no-first-use policy – as Obama reportedly wanted to during his administration—it doesn't mean much if the US arsenal remains full of destabilizing weapons that are specifically designed for a nuclear first strike.

For example, the “responsive” nature of the ICBMs – along with the inherent vulnerability associated with placing them in fixed silos – creates a “use ‘em or lose ‘em” situation, wherein the United States might actually be incentivized to shoot first during a crisis before its own missiles are destroyed. Therefore, these specific weapons are packaged with a uniquely short decision-making time – only a couple of minutes – wherein a single individual must decide whether to launch or not, with very little information at hand. By contrast, the rest of the US nuclear arsenal does not come with this kind of embedded psychological pressure. Additionally, the ICBM replacement program has several other underlying concerns, from the exorbitant costs (\$100 billion!) to the bizarre single-source contract to the widespread public disinterest in the program. As a result, in a post-Cold War era – and in the midst of a pandemic, a recession, and an election – we should be seriously challenging conventional narratives about why these weapons are “necessary.”

I'm not surprised, however, that the Platform didn't explicitly mention the ICBMs. Unfortunately, there are dozens of well-connected, corporate lobbyists who are paid handsomely to effectively suppress public and congressional debate about this issue, and as such it's incredibly difficult for lawmakers to call the program into question. Even commissioning something as basic as a feasibility study on life-extending the current ICBM force – rather than rebuilding the whole force from scratch – is an uphill battle. Pushing back against the replacement program will therefore be a monumental, multi-year effort, and much of the groundwork still needs to be laid for that particular fight.

## 5. Nuclear Weapons: Why not Take the Geneva Pledge?

**SH:** Given the implied No-First Use logic of the Platform position, why do you think there was no reaffirmation of the celebrated Reagan-Gorbachev ‘Geneva Formula’ that a nuclear war (*any* nuclear war) can never be won and must never be fought? I was frankly aghast at the omission, not least given its obvious bipartisan appeal and pedigree: could it have been some kind of oversight, or was it proposed and rejected, perhaps because America's ‘enemies,’ Russia and China, strongly support a collective P5 adoption of the Formula?

**MK:** The absence of this explicit formulation is certainly a notable omission, but perhaps not an overly surprising one, given that US nuclear forces are actively postured for nuclear warfighting. It's difficult to reconcile the Geneva Formula with the Pentagon's own admission that nuclear weapons could be used to “create conditions for decisive results and the restoration of strategic stability” – in other words, fighting and “winning” a nuclear war. The Pentagon is also conducting nuclear exercises to that effect as well. As long as the United States continues to be postured for nuclear warfighting, it will be difficult to credibly adopt the Geneva Formula as a matter of US policy.

## 6. Articles of Faith: Nuclear Weapons, the ‘Umbrella’ and NATO

**SH:** The Platform reaffirms “America’s commitment to NATO and defending our allies” – but does this necessarily mean, for example in the mind of Matt Duss and the ‘Bernie’ wing of the party, a commitment to NATO as a nuclear-armed alliance (with a first-strike doctrine and posture) and ‘defending’ others – the ‘umbrella’ states in Asia – with nuclear weapons?

To concentrate on NATO, do you see any likelihood that the Biden Administration would be open to a serious review of the Alliance’s ‘sacrosanct’ nuclear policy (and ridiculous mantra that as long as nuclear weapons exist, it must have them)? The answer appears to be a resounding ‘No,’ at least to judge by a recent op-ed (*Der Spiegel*, June 3), ‘Striking at the Heart of the Trans-Atlantic Bargain’, co-authored by Michelle Flournoy, widely tipped to serve as Defense Secretary in a Biden Administration, and Jim Townsend, also a senior Biden advisor. The authors take strong exception to the suggestion by SPD parliamentary leader Rolf Mützenich, that Germany should no longer station (and equip its air force with) American tactical nuclear weapons.

As Jon Wolfstal argued in response (*Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June 29), to simply denigrate such a stance as (to quote the op. ed.) Germany “walking away from its nuclear responsibilities” is to shirk the responsibility of all NATO states to frankly and deeply consider the 21<sup>st</sup>-century relevance – the all-too-real risks and dangers – of the continued deployment (and aggressive modernization) of US sub-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe. Wolfstal’s riposte is entitled ‘America should welcome a discussion about NATO’s nuclear strategy’: to your knowledge (or best guess), how serious a discussion of that strategy was there in the drafting of the Platform?

**MK:** I’m not aware of whether there was a serious review of NATO’s nuclear posture as part of the Democratic Platform drafting process, although my assumption is that it was likely not considered in much depth. With regards to the debate over the future of NATO’s nuclear sharing agreements, I agreed with Jon’s response that we should welcome a revitalization of that conversation within the Alliance, especially in the context of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which will soon enter into force. Several NATO partners have already ratified the Treaty, and the populations of several NATO members – including *all* of the nuclear host countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Turkey) – are at least highly sympathetic to it. It is certainly possible that eventually the Treaty will pick up enough steam that many of these countries will be forced by their own voting publics to re-evaluate their involvement with NATO’s nuclear sharing. And so, from an Alliance perspective, it would certainly be more prudent for NATO to begin these conversations now, as Jon suggests, before the issue is eventually forced upon them.