



Prioritizing Peace

A New U.S. Foreign Policy
for a Post-COVID-19 World



FCNL
Education Fund

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A NEW U.S. FOREIGN POLICY FOR A POST-COVID-19 WORLD

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Prioritizing Peace A NEW U.S. FOREIGN POLICY FOR A POST-COVID-19 WORLD

Current U.S. foreign policy is not designed to address the crucial destabilizing factors threatening peace in the world today.

The 21st century has created a new global order, shaped by racial and gender inequality, religious persecution, rising authoritarianism, transnational movements, violent nonstate actors, state fragility, *endless wars*, and climate change. Across the globe, the return of Great Power competition and regional power struggles are exacerbating violence and conflict by bolstering repressive, violent, and non-democratic regimes and by fueling proxy wars. This has led to widespread harm to vulnerable populations.

In 2019, 80 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced due to conflict, persecution, and human rights violations¹—the highest number ever recorded. Beyond the human toll of the violence, conflict and fragility have significantly affected education, health, and economic growth, among other development metrics. Violent conflict cost the world \$14.5 trillion in 2019 alone and severely affected the gross domestic product (GDP) of the world's least peaceful countries. For instance, it cost South Sudan the equivalent of 57% and Syria 60% of its GDP.²

Meanwhile, climate change is worsening resource scarcity and natural disasters, pushing fragile states beyond their abilities to cope or adapt. In the past decade, the number of water-related conflicts has increased by 270%. Over the next three decades, an additional 1.5 billion people will face moderate-to-severe food insecurity³—all of which will increase pressure on low-income and fragile states.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further shocked the global system, aggravating the negative trends of the last several decades and sparing no country—large or small, industrialized or developing, resilient or fragile. The pandemic has highlighted critical weaknesses in global diplomatic, governance, and development systems. In fact, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found that the COVID-19 pandemic has set back important measures of global development by “about 25 years in about 25 weeks.”⁴

In fragile and conflict-affected states, the pandemic has worsened underlying drivers of violence—especially patterns of inequality—and weakened social cohesion, which threatens a resumption of violence and further conflict. New research shows that 13 more countries will likely experience conflict over the next two years beyond the pre-pandemic modeling that predicted just 22 countries.⁵

Violent conflict cost the world \$14.5 trillion in 2019 alone and severely affected the gross domestic product (GDP) of the world's least peaceful countries.

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Violence and instability around the world threaten U.S. diplomatic, security, and economic interests—even when the United States is not directly involved. Armed conflict reduces or eliminates markets for U.S. trade, destabilizes U.S. partners and allies, and creates the conditions for violent nonstate actors to thrive. It allows for the near-unchecked transmission of COVID-19 within and across borders of fragile states—expanding COVID-19’s spread and the threat to Americans at home and abroad.

Yet the United States has until now failed to make conflict prevention, peacebuilding, or conflict transformation a priority of its foreign policy. On the contrary, for decades the United States has too frequently stirred the embers of conflict by selling weapons to abusive regimes, supporting authoritarian governments, and conducting military operations that have caused significant civilian harm.

U.S. foreign policy has prioritized transactional state-to-state relations, often favoring state stability over human security and seeking to maintain the U.S. position as a global power. These policies have not only undermined U.S. values, but have threatened the health, safety, and well-being of people at home and abroad.

Within the next three decades, 80% of the world’s population will live in countries listed in the bottom half of the Global Peace Index.⁶ This means a projected 8 billion individuals, more than the world’s current population (7.8 billion), will be facing political instability, resource scarcity, and violent conflict. To reduce fragility, forestall violence, and end its reliance on failed militarized approaches, the United States must break from the past and focus its foreign policy tools on peacebuilding.

The United States must marshal sufficient political will and build the structural capacity to advance stable and just peace as a foreign policy priority.

The Biden administration now faces a choice between perpetuating the previous status quo or adopting peacebuilding as a proven approach to reduce instability and prevent conflict.

Evidence shows that when actors commit over the long term to peacebuilding in fragile states, sustainable peace and stability follow. In the early 2000s, following decades of conflict and instability in Timor-Leste, international and local actors came together to develop a shared long-term peacebuilding plan to transition from a humanitarian response, supported by UN Peacekeepers, to reconstruction and to long-term development—all while focusing on reducing the drivers of conflict and fragility.

As a result of a dedicated focus on peacebuilding, in 2020 the conflict has fallen from the headlines and, for the first time, Timor-Leste is no longer categorized as a fragile state by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in its *States of Fragility 2020* report.⁷

The United States must marshal sufficient political will and build the structural capacity to advance stable and just peace as a foreign policy priority. Such capacity includes a more diverse cadre of foreign policy personnel, expanded training and professional development opportunities, an organizational structure that enables rapid response to early warning signs, policies that prioritize the safety and rights of civilians—especially women and disadvantaged groups—and funding levels commensurate with the scope of the challenge.

Although the United States does undertake and fund minimal peacebuilding efforts, they tend to be siloed and fragmented across agencies and departments. While some of these activities have been effective, especially those supporting local civil-society-led efforts, too often they lack strategic coherence.⁸ For the past several decades, neither the State Department nor the White House has prioritized an overarching goal, policy, or strategy that would elevate, guide, and coordinate peacebuilding.

The United States does have some tools for building peace, including frameworks codified in the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act (P.L. 115-441); the Global Fragility Act (P.L. 116-94); and the Women, Peace, and Security Act (P.L. 115-68); plus USAID's Bureau of Conflict Prevention and Stabilization and the State Department's Bureau of Conflict Stabilization Operations. Unfortunately, these are poorly coordinated and underfunded.

For example, the Women, Peace, and Security Act was enacted in 2017, yet it still has not received any specific funding to support its implementation at the State Department or USAID. Further, the Atrocity Prevention Fund has been appropriated just \$5 million annually since FY18. That is the entire amount the

Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding is not a single activity, but refers to all policies and actions implemented in the context of emerging, current, or post-conflict situations and which are explicitly guided and motivated by a **primary commitment to the prevention of violent conflict and the promotion of a lasting and sustainable peace.**

Peacebuilding works over the long term to transform cultural and structural conditions—not just establish short-term stability or maintain a period with little or no violence. It includes efforts led by independent local civil society and U.S. diplomacy and foreign assistance efforts specifically designed to help international and local partners **advance peace and break the cycles of violence by addressing the root causes of instability and war.**

Adapted in part from OECD, *Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities in Settings of Conflict and Fragility: Improving Learning for Results* (2012).

United States dedicates to preventing genocide globally. With robust funding, better coordination, and higher prioritization, these tools could be powerful assets for peacebuilding.

For the United States to respond to current and emerging trends, it must radically rethink its approach and modernize its toolbox. The Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) proposes an updated U.S. foreign policy that elevates peacebuilding as a core pillar.

A peacebuilding-centered foreign policy would prioritize the coordination, structures, resources, and policies necessary to provide a meaningful alternative to the short-term, militarized approaches of the last several decades. It would draw on the inclusive, rights-based principles of a Feminist Foreign Policy, which redefines security as the ability “to live life free from violence, persecution, climate impacts, and economic exploitation” and prioritizes diplomatic solutions and multilateral cooperation.⁹

Given the serious and growing threat that climate change poses to peace and human security, a peacebuilding-centered foreign policy would also support the global climate action agenda as embodied in the 2016 Paris Agreement. Conflict-sensitive climate aid could support community resilience to the shocks of both climate change and fragility and violence.¹⁰ These approaches would be mutually reinforcing and help address the drivers of violence that the world faces today.

Peacebuilding encourages local leadership and local solutions. It makes room at the table not just for national governments, donor states, and international organizations, but also for local peacebuilders and representatives of conflict-affected populations. Peacebuilding builds the trust, working relationships, policy frameworks, and institutions that allow for the lasting and just resolution of grievances without recourse to violence.

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Permanent Premises of the International Criminal Court. Photo: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

Recommended actions for the first 100 days of the Biden administration to ensure that peacebuilding becomes a core tenet of U.S. foreign policy:

1. Make peacebuilding a priority

Establish peacebuilding as a central goal of U.S. foreign policy.

2. Do no harm

Ensure that arms sales, security assistance, and military operations do not escalate current conflicts, undermine peacebuilding efforts, or exacerbate human suffering.

3. Strengthen the voice of peacebuilding and human rights in U.S. foreign policy architecture

Increase the power and authority of the offices and bureaus that focus on promoting human rights, peacebuilding, and justice.

4. Increase staff diversity and capacity to build peace

Align hiring, training, retention, and promotion policies to attain a more inclusive and diverse workforce with greater peacebuilding expertise.

5. Position peace at the center of U.S. foreign assistance

Apply a conflict-sensitive lens to all humanitarian and development assistance and increase support to local peacebuilding efforts.

6. Reaffirm the U.S. commitment to multilateralism

Rejoin multilateral organizations, pay U.S. dues in full, engage in multilateral diplomacy, and ratify and abide by international treaties.



How We Get There

Indonesia - Community Peacebuilding Discussions. Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

1. Make peacebuilding a priority

- » Include peacebuilding as a core component of the new National Security Strategy of the United States and ensure that trade, climate, and defense policies are aligned to promote it.
- » Charge the secretary of state and the administrator of USAID with responsibility to co-lead and coordinate peacebuilding efforts, with support from the under secretary for civilian security, democracy, and human rights and the assistant to the administrator for conflict prevention and stabilization.
- » Make peacebuilding a core category in the international affairs budget and request significant funding increases for all peacebuilding accounts—especially locally led peacebuilding—as part of an overall increase for diplomacy and development.
- » Appoint a senior director for peacebuilding, human rights, and multilateral affairs at the National Security Council to coordinate peacebuilding efforts across the Departments of State, Defense, Treasury, Justice, Homeland Security, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, USAID, and the U.S. Mission to the United Nations.

2. Do no harm

- » End arms sales and security assistance to countries that have used them to abuse human rights and harm civilians— such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and their coalition partners in Yemen. Initiate a comprehensive review of all U.S. drone strikes and counterterrorism operations and their impact on civilian populations.
- » Review broad sanctions regimes and release a plan for ending sanctions that cause disproportionate harm to civilians. Broad sanctions regimes have been shown to worsen human rights violations, violence against women, food insecurity, state repression, and public health in targeted countries.¹¹
- » Before approving major arms sales or security assistance programs to a country, conduct a risk assessment on whether such equipment or training could be used to violate human rights, escalate conflict, or cause civilian harm. Make the assessments public and transmit them to Congress.
- » Ensure that the Department of Defense invites the meaningful participation of the State Department and USAID in defense planning processes for major security assistance programs and regional and country strategies.

3. Strengthen the voice of peacebuilding and human rights in the State Department's approach

- » Require concurrence on all arms sales and security assistance programs at the deputy assistant secretary level from the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and the Bureau of Conflict Stabilization Operations.
- » Allow State Department bureaus and offices to formally register disagreement with a policy without vetoing it by reforming the existing policy clearance procedures. By adopting a 'non-concurrence' model, like that employed by the Department of Defense, bureaus and offices could register concerns with senior leadership while increasing efficiency and allowing for peacebuilding and human rights concerns to be formally recorded.
- » Merge the Offices of Policy Planning, Budget and Planning, and U.S. Foreign Assistance to create a State Department Office of Strategic Planning that reports to the secretary of state. This streamlined structure will better align planning, strategy development, and budgeting (similar to USAID's new Bureau for Policy, Resources, and Performance).
- » Clarify the mission and activities of the Bureau of Conflict Stabilization Operations to ensure that it is maximally staffed, funded, and positioned to prevent atrocities and conflict.
- » Create interagency task forces for each priority country designated under the Global Fragility Strategy and the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act to improve coordination and reduce bureaucratic stove piping.

4. Increase staff diversity and capacity to build peace

- » Create a career track within the Foreign Service focused on human rights, peacebuilding, and civilian protection and hire more personnel with certifications or experience in peacebuilding.
- » Train all non-career ambassadors and incoming Foreign Service officers (FSOs) on conflict and atrocity early warning signs, conflict assessment, and peacebuilding approaches so that they are better able to recognize and respond to problems before violence breaks out.
- » Integrate the phrases "a demonstrated commitment to peacebuilding" and "a demonstrated commitment to partnership with civil society" into annual performance reviews for FSOs to institutionalize commitment to peacebuilding and increase engagement with civil society across the board.
- » Set ambitious goals for the recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotion of women; LGBTQ individuals; and persons of color, including Black and Indigenous individuals in the State Department and USAID workforce and immediately rescind Executive Order 13950 on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping.¹² The lack of diversity in the diplomatic corps is a national security crisis.¹³ To effectively address the expanding economic, gender and racial inequalities around the world, the United States must recognize that diversity and inclusion in personnel and leadership are inseparable from policy decision making.

5. Position peace at the center of U.S. foreign assistance

- » Review and eliminate the bureaucratic barriers that hinder the provision of assistance to small, local civil society peacebuilding and human rights organizations, especially those run by and for women. To redress power imbalances between international and local actors, expand and reform current approaches such as USAID's Local Works¹⁴ and the New Partner Initiative¹⁵ to reduce reliance on large contracts to intermediaries.
- » Require that all country strategies and foreign assistance programming be informed by up-to-date and ongoing gender and conflict analyses. Ensure that country strategies and assistance programs clearly delineate peacebuilding objectives, activities, and metrics and that the State Department's Bureau of Conflict Stabilization Operations and USAID's Conflict Prevention Bureau have adequate resources and staffing to support this effort.
- » Increase diplomatic support and technical assistance to programs that strengthen transparency and accountability mechanisms over partner security forces. Invest in new models of security assistance, such as unarmed civilian protection programs and community policing.
- » Revise Executive Order 13224 (Modernizing Sanctions to Combat Terrorism)¹⁶ and its amendments, including Executive Order 13886,¹⁷ to exempt material support for peacebuilding and demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration programs. Charge the secretary of state, in consultation with the attorney general, to exempt the provision of expert advice or assistance, training, and personnel in support of peacebuilding and demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration programs from the prohibition in 18 U.S.C. 2339B (Providing Material Support or Resources to Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations).

6. Reaffirm the U.S. commitment to multilateralism

- » Request full funding for U.S. dues to the UN Regular Budget, UN Peacekeeping, and other multilateral organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO). Support lifting of the arbitrary 25% cap on UN Peacekeeping dues, which has led to over \$1 billion in U.S. arrears.
- » Immediately begin the process to rejoin the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and appoint representatives to all appropriate UN bodies to make clear U.S. commitment to multilateral institutions.
- » Rejoin major international agreements, including the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the Paris Climate Agreement. Align with the global consensus on arms control by ratifying the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production, and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction (Mine Ban Treaty) and by extending the New START Treaty for five years with the Russian Federation.
- » Reverse Executive Order 13928 (Blocking Property of Certain Persons Associated with the International Criminal Court),¹⁸ as it undermines both the norms fundamental to, and the actions of, the Court.

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The Friends Committee on National Legislation Education Fund (FCNL Education Fund) is a Quaker nonprofit that promotes civic engagement to advance peace, justice, and environmental stewardship. It analyzes federal policies as we build relationships across political divides.

FCNL Education Fund, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, and William Penn House are national nonprofit, nonpartisan Quaker organizations working collectively to advance peace, justice, and environmental stewardship. The three organizations seek to live Quaker values of integrity, simplicity, and peace as we actively create the world we seek.

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