

“The Cost of Trump’s Foreign Policy: Damage and Consequences for U.S. and Global Security”
Remarks by Ranking Member Menendez
October 21, 2020

Thank you, Nahal. It’s good to see you again. And thank you all for joining us online for the release of this report, *The Cost of Trump’s Foreign Policy: Damage and Consequences for U.S. and Global Security*.

Let me first explain why I thought undertaking this report was important. Much has been written about President Trump’s failed foreign policy.

But I thought it was important to assess the damage of the past four years from a Congressional perspective and to look at some of the starkest examples of how our president has engaged with the world, and what his actions have meant for the American people.

My staff interviewed dozens of former U.S. officials, many who served in senior positions in the Trump administration.

They traveled and met with foreign government officials and foreign policy experts, speaking to people from more than 20 countries.

And what we found was troubling. The consequences of both Donald Trump’s words and actions have been almost unequivocally negative for the American people and for broader United States interests globally.

Nearly four years since he took office, we see democratic decline and creeping authoritarianism around the world.

We see the North Korean nuclear and missile programs larger and more capable than before.

We see Iran inching closer to a nuclear weapon, and instead of building alliances or coming up with a better deal as he promised, President Trump has alienated our partners and allies.

Indeed, this President has repeatedly bullied and threatened our closest friends, when what we need are strong coalitions to promote our interests and address our most pressing challenges.

Look no further than the global coronavirus pandemic.

Trump isn’t leading the global response to this pandemic. He is deliberately undermining it.

This administration's unrealistic expectations, lack of attention, and inconsistency have left promising diplomatic initiatives to wither on the vine.

The President's attacks on democratic values have empowered autocrats and authoritarians to tighten their grip on power.

Former diplomats report not being able to credibly or effectively raise human rights with foreign governments.

Four years in, if you are still searching for the "Trump Doctrine" on foreign policy, you will find a warm embrace of autocratic leaders, a cold shoulder for our closest allies, and a personal agenda that comes at the expense of the values and interests of the American people.

The President has championed his policy as an "America First" approach. But in practice, what we have is a "Trump First" approach.

This report catalogues some of the most damaging aspects of what that means for Americans.

First, President Trump's foreign policy has been marked by chaos, neglect, and diplomatic failures. National security decisions have been driven by his ego and domestic political calculations, not the vital interests of the United States.

Foreign officials recounted how they don't know who speaks for the president, or whether a new policy announcement is real or will be abruptly reversed. It's no wonder why partners are wary of coordinating with us and making new commitments.

His attempts to personally engage on real crises have resulted in diplomatic failure. For example, when it became clear that a quick break-through in the nuclear negotiations with North Korea was unrealistic, he lost interest and declared the problem solved. It is not solved.

He has neglected pressing global challenges that endanger the American people, including climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and nuclear proliferation. Instead of leading international efforts, the Trump administration has undermined them, from withdrawing from the World Health Organization and refusing to participate in global vaccine efforts to abandoning the Paris Climate Agreement.

And he has politicized foreign policy by using his office to advance his own electoral interests, openly calling on foreign governments to aid him and work against his opponents.

Secondly, President Trump's corrosive domestic policies have damaged U.S. credibility abroad and undermined our ability to promote democratic values globally.

He has separated families at the border, turned away refugees, attacked the rule of law and free press, tear-gassed citizens engaged in peaceful protests, and spouted divisive rhetoric on race.

His own statements and policies have implicitly given a green light to repressive regimes around the world. His repeated attacks on the media are cited by foreign leaders in support of their own repressive acts, and, according to a former U.S. official, they “legitimize the threat environment for journalists.”

Thirdly, the President’s abrupt and inconsistent decision-making has taken close allies by surprise and thrown alliances into disarray.

We heard from foreign governments that the fabric of our alliances is frayed. Some are hanging by a thread. And for good reason: we have treated our allies not as trusted partners, but as the kid we can pick on in the schoolyard, time and again, just because we can.

From declaring Canada a national security threat, to threatening Germany with auto tariffs, to threatening and insulting Mexico, to withdrawing troops from Syria with no advance warning to allies who have security interests there – our friends feel abused and alienated.

As a result, some have begun to move on, looking to build alliances that don’t have the U.S. at the table.

Fourth, the President’s hostility towards multilateral alliances has left the United States withdrawn and isolated from combatting pressing global challenges, and provided openings to our adversaries.

Our go-it-alone approach has meant that when the United States seeks to extend a UN arms embargo against Iran, a bipartisan Congressional goal, only the Dominican Republic votes with us, and our close allies vote against us — not because they don’t agree with the objective, but because the U.S. has lost all credibility and trust on the issue.

Our increasing absence from multilateral institutions mean that our adversaries, particularly China, have a foothold to gain influence. While we have a list of grievances with the UN Human Rights Council and the World Health Organization, walking away takes away our ability to effectively counter China and to improve these institutions.

And fifth, and, perhaps most dangerously, the President’s rhetoric and actions have emboldened and empowered authoritarian regimes and autocratic leaders, weakening human rights and undermining democratic values.

President Trump has made clear that the United States will not push back when authoritarian leaders punish an academic institution, carry out a judicial power grab, or assassinate a U.S.-based journalist.

Instead of holding the Saudi government accountable for the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi, he has gone out of his way to repeatedly defend the Saudi Crown Prince, going so far as to publicly defend him over his own intelligence agencies.

Hungary's retreat from democracy and drift toward autocratic rule is not met with condemnation or diplomatic isolation, but rewarded with an Oval Office meeting where Orbán is praised as a tough but respected leader.

Today, autocrats and authoritarians know that Donald Trump has their back.

Now, Americans might wonder, "what does this have to do with me"?

It's true, U.S. foreign policy is often not in the forefront of most Americans' minds. But, it remains central to the security and prosperity of the American people.

For decades, American leaders pursued a foreign policy vision based upon a robust defense of democratic values. Today, that legacy is hanging precariously in doubt.

If the United States is not standing up to brutal regimes, demanding protection for human rights abroad, if it does not counter China's repression in Xinjiang, if it allows attacks on the free press to go unanswered—it erodes *all* of our rights, abroad and at home.

And it undermines our authority when we try to demand better of other nations. It sends a ripple effect throughout the world—if the United States can do it, so can we.

If the U.S. only bullies and threatens, our allies and partners will look elsewhere.

If we do not band together, pool our resources, expertise, and might, the United States will be ill-equipped to meet future global challenges.

So, let me conclude. Where do we go from here?

First, we need to rebuild U.S. foreign policy institutions such as the State Department, which has suffered the loss of extraordinary talent over the past four years. Restoring overseas confidence in the United States requires highly qualified diplomats who conduct themselves in a reliable and transparent manner.

Second, the United States must mend relations with allies and partners. It won't be easy, but it is absolutely necessary. Alliances are a foundational bedrock for protecting the American people.

We need partnerships that pool power and resources in order to counter Russia and China and tackle problems we cannot solve alone.

Third, halting the decline of global freedom and democracy must be a critical objective of U.S. foreign policy. Thriving, vibrant democracies around the world improve U.S. safety, security, and prosperity.

Fourth, the United States is strongest internationally when we are strongest at home. We must address our domestic flaws, including racial discrimination and inequality.

The best way to communicate to other nations that they must strive for full equality is to embody it ourselves.

This report is the beginning of a conversation about the future of U.S. foreign policy and how to undo the damage wrought by this President.

I hope it can serve as a roadmap for Congress and a future administration about what needs rebuilding and where the damage lies, and as a reminder of the consequence of an incoherent, chaotic foreign policy.

For those of us who care deeply about this country, and the role we play in the world, there is a lot of work ahead.

So, thank you for tuning in, and I look forward to your questions.