



# How Gen Z Will Shake Up Foreign Policy

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Commentary

Many Americans in Gen Z (who are colloquially known as Zoomers) saw the 2020 election as their first opportunity to help shape the future of the United States and its role in the world. Young Americans turned out to vote in record numbers—at nearly double the rate from 2018 and 8 percent more than in 2016. But despite Gen Z's growing electoral power—the generation now comprises one-tenth of the U.S. electorate—Zoomers still don't have a real seat at the policy table.

Facing an unforgiving international landscape and a devastating pandemic, older generations of Americans are charting a new course in U.S. foreign policy: redefining America's interests, reinventing its strategic toolbox, and reimagining its global role. But it is Gen Z that will live with the consequences of today's decisions and that has the most stake in their success. Zoomers have starkly different policy impulses than leadership in Washington, and at this inflection point for the United States' role in the world, policymakers must consider the perspectives and priorities of America's next generation—or risk widening the gap between the country's present and future.

## Gen Z's Novel Perspective

We were in diapers at the time of the Columbine massacre, in preschool when the twin towers fell, and just starting high school during the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. As a generation, Zoomers missed both the highs of America's post-Cold War triumphalism and the lows of its post-9/11 stumbles in the Middle East. Instead, Gen Z came of age as America's dominance waned, as its society and economy splintered, and as its challenges abroad multiplied, diversified, and intensified. Zoomers also grew up as part of the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in American history. Informed by our pluralism and twenty-first-century upbringing, Gen Z brings a distinct perspective to foreign policymaking.

Gen Z has never lived under the threat of conflict with a peer adversary, leading Zoomers to worry more about issues like climate change and human rights than war or great power competition. Nearly half of Zoomers say U.S. foreign policy should prioritize combatting climate change; only 12 percent say it should focus on countering Chinese aggression.

Zoomers are the first batch of digital natives, having never known a world without omnipresent digital technologies. This, in part, differentiates us from millennials. We grew up surrounded by technology's promise and its perils: global connectivity alongside the proliferation of digital echo chambers, rapid advancements in AI and data science and their frequent misuse, and the endless flow of information yet the constant threat of malign influence.

And, notions of American exceptionalism are not etched into Gen Z ideological bedrocks. Less than half of Zoomers support the idea that America is stronger because of its global leadership—a startling decrease from attitudes of older generations. From what Zoomers have seen, America has tremendous capacity for doing good but equal potential for botching its overseas endeavors. For every international climate agreement there

is a careless military intervention; for every major diplomatic feat there is an atrocity for which America has turned its back or stood idly.

With doubt about American leadership, distress about global challenges, discomfort with technology's reach, and indignation about America's domestic injustices, many in Gen Z are exasperated with the world we're inheriting and wary about America's capacity to manage this geopolitical maelstrom.

## Going in the Wrong Direction

U.S. foreign policy too often betrays the hopes of our generation, which holds fundamentally different views on key foreign policy issues than leading policymakers.

On both sides of the aisle, Washington inches toward a new Cold War with China, with little regard for the generation that will be tasked with waging it. Beijing's predatory economic practices and techno-authoritarian model necessitate a strong U.S. response, but condemning U.S.-China relations to open hostility will only undercut potential for cooperation on shared challenges like climate change. Nearly half of Zoomers prefer a cautious and cooperative approach to China policy. And, trying to convince Zoomers that America must assemble a united international bloc against China simply will not work. Ours is the most globally connected generation in history—with little interest in carving up the world or forcing allies to pick sides.

In the Middle East, failed U.S. policy has spanned Zoomers' entire lifetimes—from America's reckless 2003 invasion of Iraq to its negligent policy toward the civil war in Syria to its vacillating approaches to Iran. Seven in ten Zoomers support the idea that "the wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan were a waste of time, lives, and taxpayer money and they did nothing to make us safer at home." Less than one-third regard Israel as a friend—half the rate of our parents. The United States continues to lack a grounded, coherent approach to counterterrorism and diplomatic engagement. And U.S. policy remains blind to the obvious limits of America's transformative powers, apathetic to the region's human rights abuses and refugees, and inattentive to underlying sources of regional instability.

In the fight against climate change, current U.S. policy is a tragic betrayal of all future generations of Americans. Under the policies of U.S. President Donald Trump, America's environmental and climate protections have burned up faster than its west coast—a product of a political culture that puts science in the crossfire of national debate and prioritizes profit over planet. As a quarter of a million people worldwide are projected to die annually from climate change-related factors, America's leaders cling to callous claims that they "don't think science knows"—neglecting the health and well-being of their posterity.

On global technology issues, many U.S. policymakers display breathtaking ignorance of the machines and algorithms they are tasked with regulating. The naïve techno-optimism of the early 2000s has faded into a so-called techlash, equally blind to technology's risks and rewards. The Trump administration has gone after popular apps like TikTok and WeChat with more seriousness than it has pursued nuclear arms control. China is poised to lead the world in 5G, AI, quantum computing, and more, yet U.S. funding for science and technology has dried up.

Eight in ten Zoomers say promoting democracy and human rights should be priorities for U.S. foreign policy. But America's failings on issues of democracy and human rights at home give the United States little authority to proselytize abroad, especially as U.S. efforts toward these ends are undercut by arms sales to autocrats and ambivalence to abject human suffering.

The rift between older Americans and Gen Z grows wider, and the consequences of current U.S. policies will outlast the tenures of today's policymakers. If Gen Z is to one day take the helm, a new approach is needed.

## To Ourselves and Our Posterity

Gen Z is America's future and deserves its fair say at this foreign policy inflection point. Making U.S. foreign policy work for America's next generation will require at least four major changes.

First, America must reframe its approach to foreign policy challenges. The idea that issues like climate change, China, or cyber threats can be conquered by sheer American might is misguided. Pursuing outright victory over these challenges will fail unless policymakers reframe their definition of success. America must instead learn to live with them—building up its resilience, deterring the worst offenses, and responding forcefully but with discipline to crises that do materialize. President-elect Joe Biden's administration should

incorporate this perspective into the next national security strategy, recognizing that more measured expectations are pragmatic ones.

Second, policymakers must reimagine America's role in the world—scrapping the antiquated and paternalistic vision of the global policeman in favor of a more limited, modest posture. With the United States in desperate need of renewal at home, America cannot expect to remain the prevailing keeper of the peace or protector of the global commons. Gen Z has enormous stake in the world's future and cares deeply about promoting human rights and thwarting foreign terrorism—but Zoomers are reluctant to deploy force or divert resources away from domestic renewal. Today's policymakers must shed outdated commitments, share responsibilities with relevant partners, and embrace an active and affirmative—but not activist—foreign policy.

Third, the United States must diversify and strengthen its global partnerships to stay ahead of a rapidly evolving threat map. Today, the private sector enjoys enormous influence over issues of global importance, civil society organizes adeptly across borders, and individuals are super-empowered. America's foreign policy challenges—from climate change to refugees to 5G—transcend national boundaries and state capacities. U.S. international engagement should move beyond multilateralism and embrace “multistakeholderism”—pursuing policy interests through broad coalitions of governments, private companies, NGOs, and civil society groups.

Finally, policymakers must dramatically increase young Americans' buy-in to the realm of foreign affairs—expanding mentorship and training opportunities, funding language studies and cultural exchanges, establishing scholarships and pathways for students committed to public service careers, and overhauling the federal hiring process. Every effort must reinforce ambitious diversity, equity, and inclusion goals across the foreign policy community. Gen Z deserves a foreign policy workforce worthy of its pluralism and dynamism.

In the decades ahead, Gen Z will be forced to walk a policy path that it did not chart and repair damage that it did not create. Every generation has gripes with those that came before it. Today's challenges, however, risk outstripping both America's and humanity's capacity to recover. Smart policymaking must not just address the problems over the horizon, but also serve the people there too.

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