

# CORY BOOKER



## OVERVIEW

New Jersey Senator Cory Booker is increasingly taking on US foreign policy as a priority, and he has particularly good stances on urgent issues like nuclear weapons and the war in Yemen. However, we want to see him take bolder stances on many issues, including a rejection of zero-sum, great-power competition.

# 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 Booker stands:** According to his campaign website, Booker's foreign policy principles focus on strengthening multilateral partnerships—leading with values, and building out diplomacy and development efforts.<sup>1</sup> He has also acknowledged the harm that US military interventionism has caused in the world.<sup>2</sup> In the past, however, he has seemed to argue that it is necessary to perpetually maintain unchallenged US global military dominance, and to treat the rise of countries like China as a military threat.<sup>3</sup>

**Bottom line:** While Booker's rhetorical embrace of international cooperation and diplomacy is important, it must be measured against his rhetoric of zero-sum “great-power competition”<sup>4</sup> and his proposals for how the US spends its money and focuses its resources.

# 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 Booker stands:** When asked directly about the greatest threats to US security, Booker has mentioned nuclear proliferation, climate change,<sup>5</sup> and North Korea.<sup>6</sup> His Senate website boasts that he's made “countering the threats posed by terrorist groups a priority.”<sup>7</sup>

He has used hawkish rhetoric towards Russia, saying, “This is a Paul Revere moment... The Russians are coming, what are we going to do about it?”<sup>8</sup> He has also said that China poses a threat to the US as a challenger to US hegemony, and that he wants to take them on and win.<sup>9</sup>

**Bottom line:** While it's welcome that Booker mainly refrains from embracing post-9/11 threat inflation, and while he recognizes the security threat posed by climate change, he speaks in rather alarmist terms about North Korea, Russia, and China.

# 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 Booker stands:** Booker's campaign website touts his commitment to empowering diplomats, but he hasn't unveiled a specific plan to rebuild the State Department.<sup>10</sup> He's also stated repeatedly over the years that he supports cutting the Pentagon budget,<sup>11</sup> and has answered in the affirmative when asked on the campaign trail whether Pentagon spending should be cut.<sup>12</sup>

However, Booker hasn't committed to a particular plan for the size of cuts to the defense budget. He also previously endorsed the goal of maintaining the world's strongest military (though this would remain true even with steep funding cuts and drawdowns),<sup>13</sup> and he has justified voting in favor of increases to the Pentagon budget as necessary to support "readiness" despite the already bloated budget.<sup>14</sup>

Booker did vote against the most recent increase of the Pentagon budget.<sup>15</sup> He also appears to understand that the appropriate size for the Pentagon budget should be connected to the scope of the missions the US military is expected to manage, and he has committed to ending certain specific interventions

**Bottom line:** Booker has good things to say about the bloated state of the Pentagon budget. But actually reducing it will mean letting go of the blank check for pursuing unchallenged US global military dominance. He also needs to produce specific plans to reinvest resources into other foreign policy tools.

## 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 Booker stands:** Booker voted against arms sales to Saudi Arabia in 2016, long before the issue

gained national momentum.<sup>16</sup> He's consistently cosponsored and voted in favor of resolutions ending US participation in the Yemen conflict,<sup>17</sup> and has called for a "reset" of the US relationship with Saudi Arabia.<sup>18</sup> Even better, he's urged an end to arms sales to all countries unable to meet basic human rights standards.<sup>19</sup>

**Bottom line:** Booker's record on this issue is strong, consistent, and progressive.

## 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 Booker stands:** Booker has signed progressive veterans group Common Defense's pledge to end the forever war,<sup>20</sup> and has cited it with pride during the campaign.<sup>21</sup> He called the Iraq War the biggest foreign policy blunder since World War II.<sup>22</sup> However, his plans on the Afghanistan War are vague and inconsistent. At times, he has indicated support for bringing combat troops home by the end of his first term,<sup>23</sup> and at other times, he has declined to set a timeline.<sup>24</sup> He has also indicated support for keeping residual forces in Afghanistan, to protect against a "safe haven" for terror groups—an endeavor that is inherently endless and overwhelmingly opposed by Democratic primary voters.<sup>25</sup> At recent campaign events, he's stated his desire to bring troops home from Afghanistan in a way that "does not create a vacuum."

Booker has also espoused inconsistent views on whether the US should take military action in Syria,<sup>26</sup> though he's warned that prolonged US military presence in the region is unlawful and unwise.<sup>27</sup>

Booker has called countering terrorism a "priority,"<sup>28</sup> and though he's indicated support for repealing the "endless war" authorization,<sup>29</sup> he appears to prefer simply replacing it with new authorization that allows military force against terrorism to continue,<sup>30</sup> despite the lack of military solutions to transnational groups that perpetuate terror. He has failed to fully reckon with the failure of global, covert raids, drones, and special forces deployments to actually reduce terrorism, and he has not yet included this aspect of the forever war in his plans to bring conflicts to an end.

Booker has pledged to restore warmaking powers to Congress, if elected, and he has articulated a fairly narrow view of "commander-in-chief" powers that allow the executive to order military force without authorization.<sup>31</sup>

He's also derided the Trump administration's erosion of transparency in lethal-force operations, and he has called for increased reporting on civilian casualties.<sup>32</sup> However, he hasn't committed to moving those operations away from the CIA.<sup>33</sup>

**Bottom line:** In order to make good on his pledge to end the forever war, Booker must formulate a more concrete plan to end not only the large-scale operations in Afghanistan but also the targeted strikes occurring in multiple countries. He must also acknowledge that there is not a military solution to terror, and he must invest in peacebuilding institutions and operations more suited to the challenges at hand.

## 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 Booker stands:** As noted above, Booker has identified competition from China as a threat to the United States, and at times, he has used hawkish rhetoric when discussing Russia. When asked about countering Russian aggression, he said, "We also need to mend our relationship with our transatlantic allies and NATO, which President Trump's has undermined. I would seek to repair any doubts about the US commitment to its allies and partners in NATO."<sup>34</sup>

Fortunately, most of Booker's Russia policy proposals have focused on shoring up domestic election security<sup>35</sup> and on multilateral pressure to address problematic behaviors.<sup>36</sup>

**Bottom line:** Booker describes these foreign policy challenges in terms of Cold War-style "great-power competition" framing at times. He has not put forward proposals to meaningfully cooperate with the countries on shared challenges like nuclear weapons or 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 Booker stands:** While Booker has called for Maduro to step down,<sup>37</sup> he has also cautioned against a US-backed external regime-change effort, viewing this as a return to shameful past foreign policy practices.<sup>38</sup> And while he hasn't cosponsored legislation to prevent unauthorized use of force in Venezuela,<sup>39</sup> he has co-led bipartisan legislation to extend Temporary Protected Status to Venezuelans in the United States,<sup>40</sup> and he has called for multilateral diplomacy to address the political crisis in Venezuela.<sup>41</sup>

**Bottom line:** When he discusses current Venezuela policy, Booker is one of the few candidates to explicitly warn against a repeat of past US-led destabilization in Latin America, but we'd like to see him co-sponsor legislation to prevent the use of US military force in the region.

## 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 Booker stands:** Booker has frequently talked about North Korea as an existential<sup>42</sup> threat to US security. His proposed solutions are difficult to ascertain, however, and appear to mostly be rooted in knee-jerk opposition to the latest Trump actions. He cosponsored legislation to protect against a military clash with North Korea during the heated days of "fire and fury,"<sup>43</sup> but since summits between the two leaders have started, he's mostly hit Trump from the right. He's supported even more sanctions on North Korea,<sup>44</sup> indicated an unwillingness to meet with Kim Jong-un without preconditions,<sup>45</sup> and decried Trump's summits as "legitimizing" the North Korean leader.<sup>46</sup>

Booker hasn't established what step-by-step actions his administration would embrace as part of the long-term goal of denuclearization, nor has he committed to ending the still-unresolved Korean war.

**Bottom line:** Booker's opposition to Trump's North Korea policy hasn't offered an alternate, progressive vision. Instead, he has mostly recycled the talking points of those who want more sanctions and more war.

## 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 Booker stands:** Booker was a reluctant supporter of the nuclear deal in the first place,<sup>47</sup> and though he criticized Trump for violating it,<sup>48</sup> he now declines to unequivocally state he'd reenter it.<sup>49</sup> On the June debate stage, he was the lone Democrat not to raise his hand in support of reentry,<sup>50</sup> and he thinks a newer "updated" deal should be renegotiated.<sup>51</sup> While running for his Senate seat in 2014, Booker stated support for keeping a military option on the table to counter what he described as Iran's malign activities in the region,<sup>52</sup> but thankfully, he has vigorously opposed Trump's run-up to new conflict with Iran. He's cosponsored legislation both standalone and part of the must-pass defense authorization bill to prevent unauthorized use of force against Iran.<sup>53</sup>

**Bottom line:** Booker's recent opposition to a new war is welcome, but he has been consistently more

hawkish than most of his rivals in the race when it comes to Iran, and his lukewarm position on the JCPOA deal is troubling.

## 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 Booker stands (and bottom line):** Booker doesn't appear to have directly spoken out against the undue influence of the military-industrial complex, and like most Senators has fought to ensure military spending goes towards his own state.<sup>54</sup>

## 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 Booker stands:** Booker has criticized Trump's withdrawal from key arms control agreements, urging support for remaining in the INF Treaty and extending the New START Treaty<sup>55</sup> (although he hasn't cosponsored legislation to prevent a new arms race in the wake of Trump's INF withdrawal).<sup>56</sup> He's also clearly opposed production of new nuclear weapons.<sup>57</sup>

However, Booker has not yet cosponsored No First Use as a policy.<sup>58</sup>

**Bottom line:** Booker has a fairly good record on nuclear weapons, but his failure to endorse No First Use keeps him from being among the most progressive in the race.

## 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 Booker stands:** Booker has cosponsored legislation to rescind Trump’s Muslim ban and prevent future similar bans,<sup>59</sup> though he’s occasionally referred to it by Trump’s preferred, sanitized language: the “travel ban.”<sup>60</sup> Booker has committed to raising refugee-resettlement targets to at least 95,000, which is lower than some of his competitors in the race.<sup>61</sup> He has indicated support for humanitarian assistance in the Northern Triangle to address the root causes of migration.<sup>62</sup> Even better, he has called out prior US foreign policy for helping to destabilize Central America.<sup>63</sup>

**Bottom line:** Though Booker’s plans aren’t as ambitious some of the others in the race, his critique of past US policy for creating conditions underscoring today’s crisis is admirable.

## 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 Booker stands:** When asked directly about human rights protections in US national security operations, Booker pointed to Trump-era erosion of civilian casualty transparency requirements.<sup>64</sup> It’s a fair and important critique, but it ignores the fifteen

years of pre-Trump policy precedent on national security, displacing key rights and liberties. He also indicated that he believes the drone strike against US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki was both legal and necessary.<sup>65</sup>

Booker voted in favor of codifying the ban on torture,<sup>66</sup> and voted against recent expansion of mass-surveillance authorities.<sup>67</sup> He also condemned warrantless wiretapping,<sup>68</sup> and he said the Patriot Act should be “amended,” without providing specifics.<sup>69</sup>

Booker has yet to lay out what he would do with the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, if elected, nor has he directly addressed how he’d respond to the patterns of anti-Muslim dehumanization that have underscored US national security policy since 9/11.

**Bottom line:** Booker has taken baseline stances on this issue area when directly questioned, but he has failed to put forward a progressive vision of pushing back against the modern national security state and the threats it poses to rights and liberties.

## 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.<sup>70</sup>

**Where Booker stands:** Booker has named climate change as a national security threat,<sup>71</sup> and he's called to rejoin the Paris Agreement, with stronger targets,<sup>72</sup> proudly touting that he was involved in the agreement's negotiation.<sup>73</sup> In addition, he has correctly disavowed the notion that simply rejoining Paris constitutes a serious climate plan.<sup>74</sup> He's called for US international leadership to confront the crisis, including international development through the UN Green Climate Fund.<sup>75</sup> His domestic climate plan calls for a carbon-neutral economy by 2045.<sup>76</sup> He has also spoken out about the close connection between a changing climate and a new class of climate refugees.<sup>77</sup>

**Bottom line:** Like many Democrats in the primary, Booker's approach to the climate crisis ignores the significant role that US militarism plays in the problem, and that curbing militarism must be part of the solution.

## ENDNOTES

1. <https://corybooker.com/issues/national-security/>
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