2024 Presidential Debates
Policy & Messaging Recommendations

Quincy Institute
for Responsible Statecraft
2024 Presidential Debate Guidance
Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

To the 2024 U.S. presidential campaigns:

The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft is a transpartisan, action-oriented think tank working to move U.S. foreign policy away from endless war, and toward military restraint and diplomacy in pursuit of international peace.

We are happy to provide candidates with policy and messaging recommendations from our expert staff on foreign policy issues that are of critical importance to the American people — U.S. military spending, U.S.-China relations, and America’s role in the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

As these conflicts absorb seemingly unlimited resources from Washington, while many Americans struggle at home, the need to take U.S. foreign policy in a new direction — centered on advancing the safety and prosperity of the American people — is stark and urgent.

The materials included here detail our experts’ recommendations for how U.S. leaders should address the global challenges we face today — with clear eyes about what actually threatens Americans’ security, humility about the capabilities and limitations of U.S. military power, and a focus on Americans’ core interests in a peaceful, stable world.

Thank you for taking this guidance into consideration.

Sincerely,

Lora Lumpe
CEO, Quincy Institute
Are we spending enough on defense?
Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

- The U.S. already spends far more than it needs to actually keep Americans safe. Profligate military spending is driven by the continued pursuit of global military primacy, a failed strategy which has driven countless unnecessary military interventions around the world. Rampant waste, fraud, and conflict of interest in America's war spending and weapons contracting also propel the budget.

- A strategy of restraint — which would sustain an effective defense force while making the use of force in U.S. foreign policy a rare occurrence — would save human life and considerable financial resources that would otherwise be consumed by unnecessary wars like the 20-year conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- A more restrained defense strategy would allow for a cut in the active duty force of about one-third; at least a 15 percent reduction in the over half a million private contractors on the Defense Department payroll; and the construction of a smaller, more nimble Navy that does not include large, costly, vulnerable ships like next generation aircraft carriers.

- Military restraint would also be holistic and sustainable, relying on diplomatic, economic, and cultural engagement as the first line of defense — and pushing allies to stop free-riding on U.S. military largesse and begin to invest in their own defense. Funds freed up by adopting a new strategy could be invested back into the urgent challenges facing Americans at home.

**Key facts**

- U.S. military spending is rapidly approaching $1 trillion a year. We spend far more on war than any other nation — more than the next 10 nations combined, including many U.S. allies.

- The United States is also the world’s largest arms supplier, delivering arms to over 100 countries in an average year. These sales often undermine stability. U.S.-supplied weapons were used in over two-thirds of the world's active conflicts in 2022.

- The United States is slated to spend $2 trillion on a new generation of nuclear-armed submarines, aircraft, and missiles over the next three decades — despite the fact that we already deploy far more warheads than we need to dissuade any nation from attacking us.

- The Pentagon has failed six straight audits, and it can't account for 63% of its nearly $4 trillion in assets.

- The Congressional Budget Office estimates the U.S. could save at least $1 trillion over the next decade by adopting a more realistic, restrained defense strategy.
How do we compete with China and avoid conflict?

Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

- It is in the best interests of both the U.S. and China to have normal diplomatic, cultural, academic, and trade relations. The two most powerful countries in the world have much to learn from each other and much to gain from exchange. Refusing diplomacy or severing relations with China will increase the risk of international conflict and the danger of racist scapegoating in the U.S. It will also undercut U.S. gains from healthy competition and cooperation with China.

- Taiwan is the most likely flashpoint in the U.S.-China relationship, and avoiding a costly conflict should be U.S. policymakers’ top priority. Credible reassurances of Washington’s continued commitment to this priority can go a long way toward injecting stability into U.S.-China interactions over Taiwan. Avoiding inflammatory actions — such as sending senior government officials to Taiwan, putting U.S. combat forces there, or claiming Taiwan as a strategic asset — is critical.

- Some of China’s activities are destabilizing or unfair. These should be dealt with sternly, but progress is only possible within a healthy relationship — where deterrence and punishment are balanced by mutual respect and recognition of shared interests. With pressure for confrontation building in both countries, a new and inclusive direction for the relationship is required to break the momentum toward conflict. The alternative is a mutually ruinous conflict between the two most powerful countries in the world.

- Keeping China down is not a winning strategy for improving Americans’ lives, nor for dealing with the real challenges posed by China’s economic rise. Trying to exclude China from the global economy or contain it via military alliances is counterproductive and dangerous. Instead of solving the problem, coercive approaches are likely to contribute to the exact situation the U.S. wants to avoid — a powerful country with a strong incentive to undermine U.S. goals. The U.S. should instead focus on building its own competitive strengths in technology, manufacturing, and diplomacy.

- Success on urgent global problems like climate change and economic stability requires agreement between the U.S. and China; trying to sideline China is a recipe for failure and conflict. Both countries are deeply invested in the global status quo and both are looking for specific reforms to improve their performance and legitimacy. Washington should pursue approaches that create mutually beneficial outcomes — such as inviting China into discussions on global economic reform, clean energy technology, and strong public health — to build equitable, sustainable economic growth at home and in the developing world.

Key facts

- A U.S.-China war over Taiwan would have devastating consequences. It would cost the world economy $10 trillion — around 10% of global GDP. The U.S. and allies like Japan would likely lose thousands of service members, dozens of ships, and hundreds of aircraft.

- A long, violent conflict between the U.S. and China could also significantly shrink the U.S. economy; the American workforce and consumers would likely experience high unemployment, inflation, and shortages.
The One China policy has successfully maintained peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait for decades. This policy acknowledges (without recognizing) China’s position that Taiwan is part of China, while repeatedly affirming Washington’s non-support for any unilateral effort by Taiwan at independence and its commitment to maintaining only unofficial relations with Taipei.

Despite bipartisan moves toward “decoupling,” the U.S. and Chinese economies remain deeply intertwined and interdependent, with China continuing to rank as one of America’s largest trading partners.
How long should the U.S. continue to send aid to Ukraine?

Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

- **Neither side can win this war on the battlefield.** Even with billions of Western dollars in military aid and intelligence support, Ukraine has proved unable to drive Russian forces off all Ukrainian territory. In spite of overwhelming advantages in manpower and military manufacturing that have put Ukraine on its backfoot, Russia has shown little capacity for conquering — let alone governing — the vast majority of Ukrainian territory. Absent direct U.S. military intervention, which would invite nuclear escalation, the war can only end in a negotiated compromise.

- **Continued U.S. aid is critical to provide Ukraine with leverage at the negotiating table.** By combining defensive aid to Ukraine with a vigorous diplomatic offensive, the United States could secure independence for the bulk of Ukraine, provide a viable path toward its prosperity, and mitigate the dangers for Europe of prolonged confrontation with Russia. Each day that we don’t invest in a parallel diplomatic strategy undercuts the prospects for Ukraine getting more advantageous terms at the bargaining table.

- **The U.S. may continue to send weapons and money for as long as it can, but it cannot produce the fighting age men that Ukraine requires to keep the war effort going.** Russia has a larger population to mobilize if it wants; Ukraine does not. That is why Ukraine lowered its conscription age, freed prisoners to fight, and penalized young men who have migrated out of the country. Ukraine is running out of soldiers and encouraging ever deeper Western involvement in the war to compensate.

- **The amount of aid matters, but how it is being used now matters even more.** Relaxing red lines by allowing U.S. weapons to be used to strike inside Russia puts the U.S. on a glidepath to direct war with Moscow. This is not what the American people want, and it is not in the best interest of the United States overall.

- **The longer we prolong the war by sending more weapons without a parallel diplomatic strategy, the longer it will take to rebuild Ukraine.** Kyiv’s economy has been decimated and is almost completely dependent on outside aid. It cannot survive this wartime reality for long, especially with its population shrinking and birth rate collapsing. Each day the war persists takes Ukraine further from rebuilding and becoming the thriving democracy it aspires to be.

**Key facts**

- Congress has passed five bills [appropriating $175 billion](#) in response to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Much of this has gone directly to Kyiv, but billions have gone to NATO allies in the region, as well as U.S. military capabilities in support for the war in Ukraine.

- The U.S. is [depleting its stockpiles](#) of ammunition and other military equipment in service of the war. If defense contractors are mobilizing to truly re-arm and re-outfit Ukraine to challenge Russia on the current battlefield, it will take [years, not months](#), for production lines to catch up with demand.

- Western arms — [no matter how sophisticated](#) — are no longer moving the needle in helping Ukraine regain territory. Russia has been able to [adapt](#) in ways the U.S. military apparently had not anticipated.
Despite pledges of "whatever it takes" support from NATO and its member countries, European stockpiles are dwindling. Industrial capacity is insufficient to increase stores and persistent economic challenges will likely keep production low, particularly in major partner countries like Germany. As of right now, the U.S. cannot assume Europe will take up the slack.
Is a defense pact with Saudi Arabia in the U.S. interest?

Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

- Saudi Arabia is an authoritarian regime that regularly undermines U.S. interests in the region, has a deeply concerning human rights record, and has pursued an aggressive and reckless foreign policy agenda. The United States should reserve security guarantees through defense treaties for its closest allies, who share its interests and values.

- A security pact with Saudi Arabia would be a commitment to send U.S. troops to fight and die in defense of Saudi interests. The U.S. military is already stretched thin by participating in, and preparing for multiple conflicts around the world. A commitment to put U.S. lives on the line for another country should only be justified where America's strategic and security interests are clearly at stake. They are not in Saudi Arabia.

- This agreement would not be a panacea for Israeli-Palestinian or regional peace; rather, it would be a formula for more conflict and war in the Middle East. By backing Saudi Arabia, the U.S. risks exacerbating tensions in the region, galvanizing Iranian-aligned militias, and codifying warring factions rather than incentivizing localized security solutions. Under the agreement, the U.S. would introduce more arms, potentially including nuclear weapons, into the region.

- This agreement would further implicate the United States in Saudi Arabia’s reckless foreign policies. By providing cutting-edge weapons and a commitment to defend the Kingdom if it were attacked, the United States would embolden Saudi Arabia to pursue ever more reckless foreign policies -- this time, with an explicit U.S. stamp of approval. We saw in the Yemen War what it looks like to be implicated in Saudi foreign policy, wherein the U.S. provided intelligence and logistical support to the Saudi military while it prosecuted a brutal war that caused one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises.

- This agreement could pave the way for Saudi Arabia to acquire a nuclear bomb. Mohammed Bin Salman has indicated Saudi Arabia would seek nuclear weapons if it felt threatened, particularly if Iran pursued or obtained nuclear weapons. A U.S.-Saudi agreement could accelerate a dangerous arms race between the two nations. If both were to acquire nuclear weapons, it would significantly raise the stakes of regional disputes and escalate conflicts to unprecedented levels.

Key facts

- Only 19 percent of Americans support a U.S. security guarantee for Saudi Arabia.
- Since 2001, over 7,000 U.S. service members have died in post-9/11 war operations, and tens of thousands have been wounded. There are currently 30,000 U.S. troops in the Middle East now.
- Three service members stationed in Jordan were killed in January by a drone strike launched by militias aligned with Iran. This was one of hundreds of drone attacks on American military targets in the Middle East in the past nine months.
- Recently released court documents show that Saudi officials provided "crucial assistance" to some of the 9/11 hijackers upon their arrival in the U.S.
- Mohammed bin Salman’s destructive war in Yemen — which the U.S. provided intelligence and logistical support for — inflicted a devastating toll. By the end of 2021, 377,000 Yemenis
were killed in the war; over 150,000 died from direct violence, and the remainder from hunger and disease *exacerbated by the conflict*.

- Mohammed bin Salman is a ruthless dictator: His government [executed 196 Saudis in 2022](#), including 81 on the same day; [protests and demonstrations are illegal](#) and punishable by imprisonment; and the number of [imprisoned journalists and bloggers](#) has tripled since 2017.