UNBURDENED: How Harris could forge a post-neoliberal U.S. foreign policy

Global affairs expert Matthew Duss on how a Harris administration might recast America's relations with the world

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Between the ongoing wars in Gaza and Ukraine, the Latin American migration crisis, and escalating tensions in the South Pacific, there could hardly be a worse time for the U.S. to be in the midst of a foreign policy identity crisis, yet that is the reality we currently face. However, the prospect of a generational change in the Oval Office brings with it the possibility of change in American's basic approach to the world.

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In the second installment of our Unburdened series, helping to envision a truly bold Harris administration's policies, we talk with Matthew Duss — a former foreign policy advisor to Senator Bernie Sanders and a current executive vice president at the Center for International Policy — about how a potential Harris White House might tack away from the hawkish foreign policy of recent administrations towards a more equitable, post-neoliberal approach to foreign affairs that benefits workers at home and across the globe.

The vibes are good, as we have noted. But it's time to begin thinking about what Americans can and should demand of a Harris administration determined to make its work.

UNBURDENED is The Ink's *interview series named after Vice President Harris's catchphrase, where we ask some of the smartest policy minds out there to envision a bold, aggressive Harris agenda to materially improve people's lives — unburdened by what has been.*

Previously: "Unburdenomics" feat. Astra Taylor

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“Post-neoliberalism”: a conversation with Matthew Duss

So — and I know you've actually been in this role before — but if the Harris campaign or if Kamala Harris picked up the phone and called you and said, "Hey, can you be my advisor on foreign policy?" What would be your top policy wishes?

I would say there are two right now, I'd say there is an urgent one and a bigger picture one. And for me, the more urgent one is the war in Gaza, which has steadily been spreading throughout the region, not just recently, but for months. As I wrote with my colleague in a piece recently in *The New York Times*, it hasn't spread and become an all-out war in part because of some good diplomatic effort by the Biden administration, but also because of some luck.

And I think up until now, President Biden has simply not been willing to use what I think is the appropriate U.S. leverage in the form of cutting arms sales to pressure Netanyahu. I would hope that a President Harris would be willing to do that. This is something that already exists in U.S. law.

This is something a number of members of Congress, including Senator Sanders, Senator Van Hollen and others have been pressing on. There is clear evidence of violations, like severe violations of international humanitarian law, whether in the indiscriminate bombing — President Biden himself has used that word multiple times — or the restriction of humanitarian aid reaching people in Gaza. These are violations of U.S. law that govern the provision of military aid.

So what I would hope is for a President Harris to be willing finally to enforce that law as a way of putting genuine pressure on the Israeli government, Netanyahu in particular, to accept a ceasefire. Because, ultimately, getting that ceasefire is the way to stop this war from continuing to spread through the region. And that unlocks all kinds of other things, both domestically and in terms of foreign policy.

In that it would open the way to dealing with what's becoming an expanding regional conflict? There's the ongoing proxy war with Iran, and there's the war in Lebanon, which, again, is part of that same continuum. There would have to be a renewed diplomatic effort there, too.

I'll just reference a piece I wrote in *Foreign Policy* right after the transition was made to Harris as the candidate. I think there's a number of things that she can do.

I give President Biden a lot of credit, certainly on domestic policy. He has an enormously successful record, I think. On foreign policy, it's more of a mixed bag. There are definitely some successes I can point to and do point to in the piece.

But the Middle East is one region in which I think he has been trapped in an earlier era — in an outdated understanding of Israel and the region. And I think that there are things that Harris could do to really show that she's promoting a new vision of America's role in that region and how it connects to America's role in the world. And one is dealing with the issue of Iran.

The Biden administration, really publicly, rhetorically, when he was a candidate, talked a lot about rejoining the Iran nuclear agreement, but then, on taking office, waited, and I think wasted an opportunity. I think a lot of analysts told them at the time, *this government that you have in January 2021 may not be here in a few months, it's probably best to move quickly*. They

chose to wait. And when they were finally ready to talk about rejoining the deal, the Iranians were not.

I think we have an opportunity now with this new Iranian president. Again, it's not vastly different. It's within a continuum of Iranian governments, but I do think it's one that could be potentially more receptive to at least de-escalating tension and getting to some regional agreement, a smaller nuclear deal that would at least have the U.S. and Iran talking and building some measure of familiarity and trust so that we better understand each other's aims. Because I think that's what's been missing. You hear a lot now about how the Iranians are much closer to a potential breakout toward a nuclear weapon if they chose to do that, which they have not yet done. That is a direct result of Trump withdrawing from the nuclear agreement, which had Iran about a year away from that breakout. We are now potentially weeks away. That's a bad situation. So I do think negotiating some deal that puts a cap on Iran's program and then going from there is important.

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How does President Harris, assuming that there's not a resolution in Gaza before she takes office, how does she get around what the Israelis have done, including assassinations on Iranian territory? How do you cross that diplomatic bridge?

I think we really need to see a repositioning of the United States in support of international law. And we've been, unfortunately, contributing to this problem, too. The 20 years of the Global War on Terror saw the United States unfortunately leading an effort to undermine a whole set of principles, whether it's regard to assassination, whether it's regard to invasion, whether it's in regard to torture, a whole set of really important principles and norms that we helped essentially write after World War II.

The international rules-based order.

Yeah, which is a term that gets thrown around a lot. But let's actually talk about not just a rules-based order, which, as Washington talks about it, is a situation in which we get to decide the rules. And there are a certain set of rules for our friends and a different set of rules for our enemies. You can see this starkly demonstrated in the policy toward Russia and Ukraine and Israel and Gaza.

Obviously, those situations are not identical, but the clarity and the explicit combinations we see when Russia attacks civilian population, when Russia cuts off food and water and electricity to civilians, and the absolute refusal to come close to condemning it when Israel does that same thing, I think, undermines the entire enterprise.

Even the letter of the law, if you look at the reaction to the ICC, ICJ rulings in both cases.

Exactly. And I think, ultimately, that double standard — the regimes that love that double standard are Russia and Iran and China because it just corrodes and ultimately undermines the United States' ability to speak for a set of norms because it's so clear that we have different norms and standards for ourselves and our friends versus our adversary.

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We were talking to Anne Applebaum about this recently, about how this failure to stand for international law allows those regimes to talk in terms of shared grievances, even though they don't necessarily have a lot of interests in common.

They do have that now. They're able to lodge these complaints, and they have a fair amount of force in the developing world, certainly, in the areas that are contested territory. So, looking at the even bigger picture, there's a lot of other foreign policy challenges beyond the Middle East, Gaza. They're all connected, obviously.

So just looking at the bigger picture, we've talked about the Middle East, the regional war, we talked about Gaza. China is the nation everyone's talked about as the biggest great power rival.

That's one question. Another question is on Russia and the question of European alliances, NATO, and its relationship to Russia as an adversary and us as allies. What can Harris do on those two fronts, either building on Biden's legacy or changing tack?

There's a couple of things. She can do both of those things in different ways.

I would really hope that a President Harris would be more cautious about Washington's new strategic competition obsession. The speed with which this has become the new hotness… great power competition, strategic competition, mainly with China, but also with Russia. It's like, "Oh, history's back, baby."

On the one hand, yes, it's important to note that these governments, these regimes, are up to no good in a lot of cases. They have a vision for the world that does not match the United States', does not match mine as a progressive. But this idea that we're going to set up Team America on this side and Team Authoritarianism over there and then force countries in the world to pick sides, it's not going to work because other countries obviously have their own interests. They want to be able to hedge. They want to be able to have relationships.

This is statecraft as they view it. So, obviously, we want to build and strengthen our own partnerships. We want to be able to appeal to countries around the world and make clear that a partnership with the United States is going to be better for you and your people. But I think defining our entire approach to the world through the lens of strategic competition is ultimately going to lead us down a very bad path that eventually leads one place, and that's to conflict. It is not going to lead to more security and prosperity. It leads to more conflict. It's just spending more on the military and spending less here on our people at home.

And I think that brings me to the second thing. And this is something that I think is very important, probably the most important thing that Biden has done on foreign policy. And I think that is starting to articulate the post-neoliberal economic approach.

I think the clearest articulation of this was the speech that Jake Sullivan gave at Brookings back in April of 2023, saying, *Listen, all of these theories about trade and economics and lower taxes and supporting benefits to corporations and de-industrializing the American heartland and exporting jobs and all this stuff — that really didn't work. There were a lot of assumptions there that did not turn out to be right.*

And a lot of people have been saying this for a long time, especially in the Global South… These are the countries where this approach had empowered corrupt elites and still does. So I think that shift is important. Acknowledging that you have a problem, as they say in recovery, is the first step.

So what can Harris do there? How can she acknowledge that there's a problem and translate that into policy? And then in a Harris administration, what levers can she pull? Where are the opportunities for collaboration versus competition or a different sort of appeal to the developing world, at least?

First, I'd say focusing — and I don't think it's zero-sum — at home versus focusing abroad, but part of what I think was important about that speech that Sullivan gave is it really gave a robust description of how these things are interconnected. It's been this slogan for the longest time. *We have to be strong at home to be strong abroad.* And that was just a thing that politicians would say, but I think there was a lot of meat put on the bones in that speech. And it was broader.

Sullivan has wanted to deliver the speech, but there are others like Jennifer Harris and others who've been doing really important work on this for a long time. And, once again, originally, this is a critique that originated from the Global South, from the communities that suffered on the pointy end of these policies. So part of what a President Harris could do would be to really lean into the fact that we are doing industrial policy.

The old sense was, *well, the government just needs to get out of the way and let the market work its magic and everything will balance out*. And, again, part of what's important now is the acknowledgment that it doesn't work that way. Government needs to play a major role in shifting and directing resources to rebuild American manufacturing, to rebuild American infrastructure, to plowing American tax dollars, into all of these things — promoting jobs that way, generating growth that way.

This is hearkening back to a much older conception of how the market works. John Maynard Keynes and others who had been writing about this and making these arguments for a long time, and we had to learn this lesson. But where I would caution is to not justify all of this on the basis of, *because this will help us compete with China*.

What is the right message for Harris then? How do you talk about this in terms that are not distorted by this — as you just put it — new hotness of great power competition.

I think focusing on: *This is what is going to be good for American workers*. It's going to be good for workers around the world. We are not pitting American workers against workers in China or anywhere else in this zero-sum competition. What we are doing is going to be good. Again, the United States government's first responsibility, first and foremost, is to the people of the United States. But making a pitch not only here but globally to say, *Listen, we want to raise worker standards. We want to raise labor standards. We want to protect labor's right to organize*. That's a very powerful message. And I also think looking at the speech that JD Vance gave at the RNC — in some ways, that was a mirror image or a darker version of the speech Jake Sullivan gave at Brookings because it was billed as a foreign policy speech.

And yet it was all about trade. It was all about how the elites have failed working people. That is a very powerful message. And people can call him weird all they want, but I'm saying that was a map to what they are trying to do.

That's in a way the populist economic message on globalism, right?

That's right. And again, I don't share some of that rhetoric about globalists. I think that's clearly coded anti-Semitism.

I do, however, think that making a pitch, understanding that our government has failed its workers in so many ways, failed American communities. This was one of the real lessons coming out of 2016. This is what drove the Trump phenomenon. In many ways, this is also what drove the Sanders phenomenon because Bernie, in his way, made a similar critique, a much more, in my view, unifying and positive and affirmative critique. But the message was, Our system has failed working people.

This seems like a good way to go at it, from both a domestic and a foreign policy perspective: the problem is that this stuff exacerbates inequality worldwide, both at the level of nations and at the level of workers. So is that something she could go after productively as well?

Yeah, inequality is absolutely part of this. Inequality, kleptocracy, corruption. These all, I think, form a grand unified theory, as I would call it, because it's lack of accountability for government, which drives, I think, a lot of this grievance politics. And I use that term, but a lot of these grievances are right. It's just like, Where are you pointing your finger? It's not immigrants' fault. It's not LGBTQ people's fault that government hasn't delivered. Immigrants did not decide to ship American manufacturing elsewhere.

That was corporate America's fault, with the support of the U.S. government.

So I guess the question is then, to address that, what does Harris do? To clarify that grievance is a tool. We've got to use it constructively rather than reductively. What leverage does she have to pull in, say, the first 100 days?

Minimum wage legislation. Minimum corporate tax legislation nationally and globally. The global corporate minimum tax is a huge one that her administration should really lean into.

I think of Gabriel Zucman's work on the idea of a global billionaire tax idea as well. That seems like an area for collaboration, too.

Yeah. Global minimum corporate tax and a global minimum wage raising America's minimum wage substantially. Leaning into the social safety net. Maybe she doesn't have to go as far as Medicare for All. But, again, part of what Americans lack is a social safety net that so many of our European partners just enjoy.

And I think really heading in that direction and showing people the deliverables as soon as possible is going to make a real difference. Not just for her. Not just for her own presidency, but dealing with some of the political divisions that we have right now.

It's funny, I don't know if this is because these are all preconditions for doing anything globally, but a lot of the stuff we've been talking about — even though we started talking about foreign policy — is domestic policy for the most part.

Are we at the point where the United States has to really deal with its own problems before we can address any of these other things?

No, I think these things can have to happen in parallel because we don't get to just call a timeout from the world, right? These global crises will continue, whether it's wars in the Middle East, potentially elsewhere, whether it's the migration crisis, which she's been a leading voice on.

And, again, people throw around the term "border czar," but I do think her role was actually more important because she was someone who was out there dealing with the root causes of irregular migration, which is absolutely the right way to go at this. We're not going to scare people away from the border given what they've already risked to get here. You need to address the reasons that they are choosing to flee.

Do you think she's been able to push back against that effectively? There was this attempt to tar her with that. Clearly, her role was not that and was on this deeper meaningful long-term level. Has she been able to push back about that? And how could she push back against that more effectively and bring that understanding to the policy arena?

For a lot of people just flinging the accusation at her, it's obviously being done in bad faith. There's not really anything you can do in response. But I think part of it is to tee up a plan to bring some order to border enforcement, but also to continue talking about what the United States can do in partnership with other countries in the region to deal with some of these root causes. Venezuela is one example. The Washington sanctions mania has made this situation worse. No one's going to defend Maduro's regime. No one should. It's an awful regime that very clearly stole this most recent election.

But let's understand the actual impact of these broad-based sanctions we've been imposing, not just in Venezuela, but elsewhere around the world.

Hyperinflation, right?

Right. They don't actually produce policy change. They just produce more refugees, more migrants. They produce more corruption on the parts of elites inside these countries.

So what is the policy translation of that idea?

I do think there are definitely plans out there for deep sanctions reform. An assessment of where and how this stuff has worked and, more frequently, not worked.

But I think part of it is showing the willingness to take on these political fights, because a lot of this really does come down to the politics of it, right? And let's just use sanctions as an example. It's like the way sanctions tend to work now is they're not imposed to produce change on the part of the target government. They're imposed to create a bad news day for future U.S. governments when they might want to withdraw the sanctions, right?

Let's just use the example of Iran. At the end of the Trump administration, they piled on all these new sanctions, and they were pretty explicit. Why did we wait until the last minute to do all this? Because we know that it's going to look bad for Biden when he pulls off these sanctions. So I think actually having a conversation about that and calling that what it is is important.

You're talking about changing how foreign policy works as a tool for the executive.

That's right. I'm a foreign policy nerd. I don't imagine that most people in this country care about foreign policy in the way that we in Washington do. They care about it in ways that are important to them. People do care because, again, it's so much at the heart of all these issues which are drivers of domestic dissent.

Some of the wake-up call of 2016 was there's just a sense on the part of a lot of Americans that the way foreign policy is talked about and the assumptions that guide the so-called consensus, we don't share it. We have real questions. That's not to say Americans want to withdraw from the world. Clearly, they don't.

But I think the way that foreign policy tends to be this elite sport in Washington just doesn't connect to their lived experiences. So, again, I don't have a set of precooked answers here, but I do think we ought to have a president and her team get out there and say: "This is why this matters to you. This is why peeling sanctions off this very bad government and perhaps coming up with some more targeted measures are going to make the situation better in ways that you will feel. If not now, then in the future." And that's been part of her message, just in the first couple of weeks of the campaign. It's been about freedom you can feel. Stuff that matters, things that will make you more able to live your life. And that's ultimately a very materialist way to go at it.

It's one thing to hear a really great speech. It's another thing for a leader to say, "This makes a material impact in your life, in your community that you can feel." That's the most powerful thing.

Switching gears here a little bit, what does she do about Ukraine? What does she do about Russia?

This is an area where I think Biden has handled things fairly well, all things considered.

I think helping Ukraine defend its country serves a pretty foundational value, which is the right of countries not to be invaded by their more powerful neighbors. We are in what looks like a stalemate now. I think, let's try to identify the path of least harm here.

Now, if there was a negotiation in the offering to draw the lines here, would we encourage the Ukrainians to go for it?

I think we would. And that's not to diminish what this would mean for Ukrainians who would continue to live under Russian occupation. Again, that's not the decision for us to make. But as I said from the beginning, the fact that we are giving such enormous support to Ukraine does, I think, give us some legitimate input into how this war comes to an end.

But, again, I haven't seen any evidence that Putin is interested yet in that. And he has a very important vote here. So it's all well and good to support diplomacy to end the Ukraine war, which I do. I just, as of yet, haven't seen evidence that Putin is interested in such diplomacy. So

there have been little signs here and there. And I think we should obviously continue to probe for that at various levels, which I think we are.

So the best case for Harris is to continue what Biden has been doing, which is open the door for diplomacy, continue to support military response, support Zelensky?

Maybe there's room for a larger set of talks. But again, I think before you get into peace summit territory, you do want to have some good evidence that both sides are prepared. And, again, I don't want to create an equivalence between Russia and Ukraine, so I'm mostly just talking about Russia. You'd need some evidence that Russia and Putin are actually interested in some resolution to this.

So there's another giant opportunity for global collaboration, which is on solving climate. And in a way that is the ultimate foreign policy question because it's a driver of all of these other problems. It is literally existential. So what does she do there?

Again, this is where I think Biden has been really successful — unprecedented investments in green energy. Continue those, look for ways to expand those here. But also, this is where the China question comes in, too, because this is the biggest shared global challenge, the United States and China being the two biggest economies, two of the biggest greenhouse gas emitters.

And that goes back to the trade questions and to some other questions about who benefits from the various protection strategies that have been put in place, how those could be changed.

Right. This is interesting because I think this is an area where Biden's rhetoric has actually been pretty good.

But the policy is telling a different story, right?

The policy is a much more aggressive one that seeks to cordon off elements of China's economy. It does exactly what I was warning about earlier. It does seem to pit the prosperity of the United States and the health of American workers against those of Chinese workers. And I think that's ultimately not a productive approach. And the bottom line is, we will not deal with the global climate crisis without China's cooperation. Now, that's going to be hard. It's not impossible.

I know a lot of folks say, "Well, they're just not interested." Well, we have to keep seeking opportunities for that. That is, I think, in part the work of diplomacy of just being frustrated and frustrated and frustrated until you find that opportunity, and then you build on it as much as possible. So in order to be able to do that, this is where the rhetoric does matter, not buying into the anti-China line.

Again, there's a way to have a decent, smart, reality-based conversation about what the Chinese Communist Party is, what it's doing to its own people, what it seeks to do abroad without buying into this line that *China is the most dangerous thing ever and we need a special select committee to deal with this threat because it is so huge*. That line ultimately tees up a political environment that makes smarter, less militarist approaches more costly. It's a political environment that is designed to benefit hawkish arguments. And those are not the arguments that are going to help us.

So what argument does a President Harris make in that case? What does she say? Who does she say it to?

Well, I think she can pick up on a lot of the rhetoric from Biden. I would be cautious about new restrictions on Chinese goods, on the Chinese economy, on Chinese manufacturing, certainly in the immediate term.

But you should bring the policy more in line with the rhetoric, is what you're saying.

I think that's right.

So what does that policy look like then?

It recognizes that China has a growing economy. It certainly has legitimate interests in its region. The United States also has legitimate interests in that region. We are a Pacific nation as well. We have close relationships and alliances in that region. We have, I think, a shared interest in freedom of the seas, in free trade.

I think China does have a point, when the United States has assumed its right to act as this global military hegemon for a long time.

Yeah, China has questions about that. It has ideas about its own role. I think just frantically trying to sustain America's military hegemony for its own sake is going to put us in a bad spot. This is where you just have to keep talking.

You have to keep showing that we are not interested in just crushing China's economy or suppressing its growth. But we have a set of principles that we believe in, that our partners believe in, and that we believe are universal, that we're going to continue to support. I think that argument is going to be bolstered by being seen as acting in accordance with it everywhere around the world, not only in selected places.

How does that work when it comes to Taiwan, which is important both as a point of tension between the U.S. and China and as a critical nation in the supply of chips?

Yeah. I would say both in terms of values and interests, I think we do have an interest in the status quo. It's an unsatisfying status quo, certainly for the Taiwanese people, but as someone who believes in democracy — I support Taiwan's democracy; I don't want to see it crushed; I think that the people of the island have the right to determine their future; I think the people of China should have the right to determine their own future democratically — but for right now, when I'm looking at the different options, the unsatisfying status quo of ambiguity is working OK right now. If China becomes more and more aggressive, we may have to revisit that.

Does Harris need to walk things back? (I'm thinking of congressional visits to Taiwan in recent years.) Or does she need to make a stronger statement?

I don't think those congressional visits have been very helpful. At least that's what I hear from my Taiwanese colleagues. That's a really important piece of this, too.

Let's listen to the people in these countries and in these communities who will be the target and will suffer first — and probably the most — if conflict does erupt. So I think there's things she can do very early on, both in terms of rhetoric and in policy, to show the Chinese government what we're trying to do.

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