The Center for International Policy aims, through this Rethinking National Security blog, to open up the debate about our foreign policy and national security policies and related programs. We believe that there has long been a mismatch between our national values and goals and our policies and funding for defense and foreign affairs programs. It is now widely acknowledged that for too long we have put a myopic emphasis on expensive, unworkable, and inappropriate defense programs and strategy at the expense of more effective and appropriate foreign policy and diplomacy tools. The moment is right to set a good balance of our diplomacy, intelligence, and diplomatic structures and programs for the new landscape of the 21st Century.

In the same way, the time has come for Americans to become reenergized and reengage in the debate over the way forward for America in the world. Our national security over the last decade has been weakened by our diminished international standing due to over-use of our military when other tools would have been more appropriate. We must not turn our backs on constructive engagement in addressing the true challenges of our times. Rather, we must examine the risks we face and the best approaches to resolve them, ensuring that they serve the interests of the entire global community, of which we are a vital part.

America has a great opportunity to make a real change in its foreign and national security policies. Abhorrence of past ill-considered actions and their horrific consequences must not stop us from repairing the damage and playing a cooperative and multilateral role in shaping a more peaceful and prosperous world.

The new administration is undergoing major reevaluations of our defense and nuclear posture and is leading the way to deal with serious non-proliferation issues, addressing the creation of a new START agreement, the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and ensuring that the goals of the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), including nuclear arms reductions, are strengthened.

The framework of a forward-looking dialogue on America’s strategic role in the world will therefore need to tackle the following points:

(1) Address the question of the need to strengthen our tools of diplomacy, place our intelligence and defense agencies in their proper roles, and reinforce the constructive capabilities of international organizations. As part of any dialogue, we need to identify the resources necessary for effective multilateral solutions, or at least amelioration of unstable and dangerous situations. Issues such as global environmental degradation, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and above all, the destructive force of widespread poverty, ethnic hatred, and resulting hopelessness and authoritarian rule that breed conflict, should be on the citizen’s debate agenda. A vital focus must also be on our horrendous defense expenditure which is now greater than all other nations’ combined, yet has proven to be ineffective in addressing many of our key challenges.
(2) We need to discuss the best ways to regain the confidence of our friends and allies which we wastefully lost by employing policies that were both myopic and ineffective.

(3) Go beyond just our friends and allies to engage those we have needlessly ignored, as well as those who have remained aloof from our efforts. A “fresh start” appears warranted, and we should debate how best to carry such a new direction in our policies. We have in the past ignored many regions, countries, and issues. This would include much of Latin America, parts of Asia, and emerging nations and potentially problematic or cooperative key nations such as India, Brazil, and not least China and Russia.

(4) We need to seek new ways to address countries like North Korea and Iran, which are potentially unstable and pose possible dangers to a world free of nuclear weapons. In addition, issues of genocide, humanitarian disasters, and the consequences of conflict and ethnic strife in regions such as Darfur, should also be included.

To move on creating such a citizen’s debate, the first requirement is to provide a forum for a citizen’s dialogue that is both wide and deep. We seek a dialogue that does not avoid the mistakes of the past, but rather, looks for constructive ways forward and builds upon the best American traditions. It is a dialogue that is respectful of other’s views but is also direct and faithful to the realities of our times and the facts on the ground.

In this blog, we aim to establish this dialogue with our nation’s citizens on many levels, via, first the Internet and other tools of modern communications media, and also at the personal and grassroots levels. We wish to encourage people meeting face-to-face to debate these issues and become involved.

To help this process, we will involve some of our nation’s leading foreign and national security affairs experts and provide accessible background policy papers on key issues so that all are better informed. In this manner, constructive approaches for a new American foreign policy can be developed, carefully examined, and, where appropriate, supported.