

**To:** President-Elect Obama  
**From:** Carlos Pascual, The Brookings Institution  
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**Re:** Restore American Leadership to Address Transnational Threats

## The Situation

The 21st century will be defined by threats unconstrained by borders: the global financial crisis, nuclear proliferation, poverty, terrorism and climate change. No nation, including the United States, can confront these [transnational challenges](#) alone. To protect U.S. national security in today's interconnected world, you and your national security team must [revitalize American leadership and build international cooperation and effective partnerships](#).

The moment is ripe to overhaul the international system. Issues at the top of your foreign policy agenda—the global financial crisis, terrorism and conflict in the broader Middle East and South Asia, the Iranian nuclear threat, energy insecurity and the growing specter of catastrophic climate change—have highlighted global interdependence and weaknesses in the alliances and international institutions that must meet these challenges.

You will encounter soaring international expectations, but also effusive good will that provides a window of time for you to restore America's global credibility. You will also encounter strong messages from key allies and partners that an early U.S. re-commitment to [effective international cooperation](#), or "multilateralism," is a top priority. Early signals of this commitment and a focus on global cooperation can extend the period of international optimism and support for your foreign policy.

## Your Stance

You have heralded the importance of rebuilding our alliances to meet the common challenges of the 21st century. You have repeatedly emphasized that America is strongest when it acts alongside strong partners. During your campaign, you committed to:

**Talk to friends and foes:** You spoke of tough, direct diplomacy without preconditions. You underscored that, if America comes to the table to work with global partners, the world will be far more likely to rally behind U.S. leadership.

**Arrest Climate Change and Invest in Energy Security:** By underscoring stewardship of a "planet in peril," you have put climate change and energy security at the top of the U.S. agenda.

**Expand U.S. Civilian Capacity:** You committed to increase our civilian diplomatic and development capacities as essential investments to confront 21st century challenges.

**Revitalize Non-Proliferation:** You committed to resuscitate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime of eliminating nuclear weapons, guaranteeing access to civilian nuclear power and tightening

proliferation controls by ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, controlling fissile material and strengthening IAEA scrutiny.

**Combat Global Poverty:** To meet the Millennium Development Goal of cutting extreme global poverty in half by 2015, you advocated doubling our foreign assistance.

**Refocus Counter-Terrorism:** You recognized that [defeating terrorism](#) begins with law enforcement and intelligence, with military force a last recourse.

## Further Recommendations

The international community will look to the United States for leadership throughout the accelerated 2009 agenda—in April at the G20 economic summit and NATO summit, in May at an NPT preparatory conference, in July at the G8 summit and in December at a post-Kyoto climate conference. This requires quickly developing positions on complex issues with major domestic political implications in a complicated legislative environment. Merely coordinating policy across agencies, issues and international players will be extraordinarily difficult.

**Use the UN:** Deliver a major speech by mid-March outlining your international security agenda, affirming America's commitment to international cooperation and creating a foundation for obtaining cooperation from others on critical issues. Addressing the General Assembly will signal U.S. support for the UN while fortifying your credibility on UN reform. This speech should emphasize:

- Expanding and revitalizing international institutions, including the UN Security Council and the G8, to encompass emerging powers
- Investing in poverty eradication during the global economic crisis, to assist vulnerable people in both industrialized and underdeveloped countries
- Supporting mandatory restrictions on greenhouse gases recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
- Strengthening nuclear disarmament, with access to civilian nuclear power and stronger controls on proliferation
- Sharing the burdens of addressing pressing and complex global challenges with other leading nations, and
- Forging a global framework to sustain peace in the broader Middle East and South Asia.

**Expand the G8:** Shifting responsibility for addressing the economic crisis to the G20 reflects the reality that the G8 cannot resolve the world's financial problems. The same is true on climate change, proliferation, transnational terrorism and international conflict. Quickly seek consensus with Italy, the G8 chair, and other major G8 players to welcome China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa into negotiations. Even if, as some argue, the G20 is too unwieldy for all political issues, you can support a new "G13"—with regional observers from the EU, African Union and Arab League—equipped to craft solutions to major transnational problems.

**Restructure U.S. Agencies:** The Departments of State, Defense and Treasury—and the National Security Council (NSC) and Agency for International Development (AID), among others—were not structured to handle interconnected global issues. Rather than placing climate change, nuclear security, economics and terrorism into separate organizational cones, develop integrated management strategies that capitalize on ways these issues affect each other, and translate them into on-the-ground realities. For example, terrorism strategy should be translated into policies, institutions, capabilities and new practices in Pakistan and Egypt; global and bilateral agendas must intersect.

Effective management requires several enhancements:

- The NSC and National Economic Council directorates must contain the skills and expertise to coordinate diverse transnational issues.

- Counterparts of the NSC “sherpa” (the president’s lead adviser on the G8) in other agencies must coordinate policies across programs and countries.
- Within State, policy development must engage regional bureaus and embassies, including AID missions, to inject foreign realities into a global agenda.
- Although structured with a domestic focus, White House coordinating bodies on economics and climate change—issues integral to our relations with Europe, China, and others—must involve foreign policy officials.
- Congress must be persuaded that, just as we have invested in the military, now we must double the foreign affairs and foreign assistance budgets to build civilian capacities to address transnational threats to our security.

**Use the G20 to Open Markets and Address Poverty:** Protectionist policies aggravated the Great Depression. You will need to resist pressures for protectionism, especially due to fears of job displacement to China. There will be pressure for a cross-border carbon tax on Chinese products. That could lead to China curtailing its purchase of, or even selling, U.S. Treasuries. Europe would likely then impose a similar tax against U.S. products.

In preparing for the G20 economic summit, collaborate with British Prime Minister Brown, the World Bank, UN Development Program and non-governmental organizations to shape a stimulus package for the poor. A \$50-billion initiative for the world’s poor would go far and could leverage private contributions.

**Set Realistic Worldwide Expectations on Climate Change:** The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change will produce an agreement in December in Copenhagen *only* if there is a credible U.S. commitment to restrict greenhouse gas emissions. It remains unclear if the Congress will be ready to support in 2009 legislation that will impose a price on carbon that will increase electricity prices and slow growth in carbon-intensive industries, many already hit by the recession. The worst case is for the United States to make commitments at Copenhagen that cannot pass the Senate, duplicating the Kyoto Protocol disaster. It would be better to re-gauge expectations and reset the calendar for a comprehensive agreement, making Copenhagen a stop in the journey, perhaps agreeing there on technology investments and dissemination. If expectations are to be recast, you must engage other leaders immediately to sustain international cooperation and avoid a fiasco.

**Craft a Comprehensive Nuclear Agenda:** Nuclear arms reductions with Russia – setting an initial target of 1,000 warheads each—are critical for global security and to get non-nuclear weapons states to cooperate on nonproliferation. Russia is an essential party to offer supplies of nuclear fuel and reprocessing of spent fuel, both critical to a possible package with Iran if it foregoes a weapons enrichment capacity. In turn, an Iran accord will set a new standard for other states seeking civilian nuclear power. The challenge then will be getting all states to accept the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, along with enhanced inspections and control of fissile materials used for military purposes.

Policy on nuclear security, Russia and Iran should be developed as a single package. You will need to engage personally with Russian leaders. It also would be wise to signal a willingness to engage Iran—in partnership with Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—regardless of who wins Iran’s election in May, so that President Ahmadinejad cannot claim to hold Iran’s only key to international negotiations.

**Use NATO to Consolidate Strategy on Terrorism and South Asia:** A NATO failure in Afghanistan would show that the international community cannot save a fledgling democracy struggling with terrorists. Increased security must be part of the equation, but the political challenges are daunting:

- Narcotics account for two-fifths of Afghanistan’s gross domestic product and cause massive corruption, especially among the police.
- The government is discredited.
- No political strategy, beyond hits from predator drones addresses the governance void in Pakistan’s tribal areas, where the Taliban can regroup.

Your new special envoy on South Asia must work hand-in-hand with your UN and NATO representatives and advisers on Europe and South Asia to craft a comprehensive political strategy that can win approval at the NATO Summit—and ideally from the new G13, which would add China’s crucial voice to the discussion.

## Conclusion

This massive agenda will move ahead relentlessly. The United States can either engage and shape it, or defensively react to events.

International polling demonstrates that others welcome American leadership—if the United States listens and abides by international rules. But, failing to cooperate could encourage other countries to take adverse unilateral actions. Quick, strategic action is imperative.



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