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The Republican Party and US Foreign Policy

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ROBERT SINGH, SEP 20 2012

Until the attacks on US embassies across the Middle East of mid-September, foreign affairs had played a minor role in the 2012 US elections. With Americans preoccupied by domestic matters from the \$16 billion national debt to unemployment, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan drawing to their messy conclusions, the US world role received limited attention. Yet, to believe partisans on both sides, the consequences of the presidential election could yield results that would shape American interests and influence, and global stability and prosperity, for years to come – whether in relation to Iran, Russia, China, the ‘Arab Spring’, the euro-zone, international trade and the global economy.

In a thoughtful 2011 essay about the Republican Party’s future, James Reichley speculated that, in the event of an unsatisfactory Obama stewardship, ‘conservative foreign policy realists and neo-conservative interventionists, both conceivably having learned from past mistakes, may achieve some kind of truce to work together constructing a coherent Republican foreign policy.’[1] One year on, that truce merits scrutiny. After one of the most controversial and polarising foreign policies under George W. Bush, where does the party now stand on international affairs? Would a Mitt Romney presidency ‘repeal’ the Obama administration’s signature initiatives on foreign as well as domestic policy?

The Republican Coalition: Nationalists, Hawks and Primacists

One of the difficulties in identifying a clear foreign policy position in the US context stems from the decentralised nature of the two main parties. Determining where a party stands on international matters hinges on whom one cares to listen to: the president or the presidential nominee of the out party; members of Congress; the party’s activist base; or elites – in think tanks, academia and the press – who help to interpret world affairs and influence the party’s stance. Notwithstanding the party convention’s election year platform, no definitive statement of party positions exists.

Nonetheless, the state of intra-party competition, the dominant themes sounded by key party officials and supporters, and the critiques of administration foreign policies together afford some indication of where a party would like to lead the US. In this regard, the Republican Party of 2012 offers intriguing evidence of a party still perched ‘between realism and neo-conservatism.’

At first glance, the term ‘party’ might appear a misnomer, given the array of competing groups populating the GOP base. Even without taking account of the many divisions over domestic affairs from social conservatives and libertarians to fiscal hawks and supply siders, the Republicans represent a foreign policy ‘big tent’: realists, Tea Partiers, neo-conservatives, paleo-conservatives, and libertarian anti-interventionists. Yet the extent of Republican foreign policy divisions should not be exaggerated, for three reasons.

First, with the exception of the anti-interventionist strand, more unites than divides the GOP on foreign policy. While Ron Paul won a loyal set of ardent followers in the 2012 presidential primaries, his calls for retrenchment, defence cuts and not attacking Iran fell on mostly barren ground. With the partial exceptions of the issue of immigration and the candidacy of Jon Huntsman, the party’s putative standard-bearers – Michelle Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Rick Perry, Rick Santorum and eventual nominee Mitt Romney – were in broad and consistent agreement

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on the same mantra: forceful leadership, American exceptionalism, strong defence, and a rejection of Obama's embrace of engagement.

Second, without fetishising academic typologies, it is clear that the dominant strands in the party represent distinct but overlapping versions of conservative internationalism. To take the categories used by the pre-eminent analyst of the GOP and foreign policy, Colin Dueck, the modern party is divided between four tendencies: *realists* favouring the prudent use of force and diplomacy to achieve narrowly defined national interests; *hawks* who believe in the utility of military power and occasional need for armed intervention overseas; *nationalists* concerned with preserving America's sovereignty and avoiding diplomatic concessions to overseas adversaries; and *anti-interventionists* keen to avoid military conflicts abroad. Paul's fate illustrated the – for now – limited appeal of anti-interventionism, while the defeat of Senator Richard Lugar by a Tea Party opponent in Indiana's Republican Party primary in 2012 eloquently symbolised the increasing marginalisation of traditional realists. The dominant force in the contemporary GOP is a hawkish conservative nationalism that remains committed to preserving US primacy.

Third, while much has been written about its influence, the Tea Party is overwhelmingly concerned with issues of taxation, deficits and debt. To the extent it has a position on foreign affairs, it is essentially one focused on preserving US sovereignty. Even here, the Tea Party is more Palinite than Paulite. As Dueck has argued compellingly, utilising the definitions identified by historian Walter Russell Mead, the default position of the party today is Jacksonian. The conventional story of the party's transition from 1930s isolationism to modern internationalism is better conceived as the transition from anti-interventionism to interventionism. As Dueck argues, the right wing of the GOP has never been devoted to 'realism.' The constant touchstone for Republican conservatives has instead been an intense American nationalism that in its own way is quite idealistic.

Romney or Reagan Republicans?

In his book, *No Apology*, Romney reiterated the standard critique of Obama's foreign policies, emphasising American exceptionalism, a muscular approach to adversaries, preserving US primacy and maintaining a strong defence. 'Soft' and 'smart' power were conspicuously absent from the book and the subsequent campaign.

But, two questions cast doubt on the notion that a truce has yielded a genuinely coherent GOP alternative to Obama.

One centres on just how coherent the Romney policy is. While one can easily discern what Republicans like and dislike about Obama in terms of broad themes, how these translate into specific policy differences remains opaque. That is, beyond bromides about the need for 'leadership', rejecting 'apology tours' and disavowing 'leading from behind', whether and how the GOP offers a genuinely alternative set of strategic goals, or merely different tactics, remains unclear. Obama has, for example, expressly ruled out a policy of containing a nuclear Iran and promised that all options remain on the table. As such, the difference seems to be less whether, but when and how, the US intervenes. Romney's campaign has equivocated on whether a 'capability' or actual weapons is the key 'red line.' And as critics from both left and right point out, it is far from clear exactly how Romney's position differs from Obama's. Romney's implicit claim – that somehow Iran would behave differently with him in the White House – ironically echoes Obama's own naïve belief in the transformative potential of his personal qualities.

Similarly, while abundant problems plague the 'reset' with Russia, it is by no means clear how the US would recalibrate relations under Romney (who apparently sees Moscow as America's 'number one geo-political enemy'), beyond a more aggressive embrace of missile defence and more forthright statements on human rights abuses, democracy and the rule of law. Campaign rhetoric about Chinese currency manipulation also appears only the latest four-yearly instance of fanciful electioneering rather than serious policy towards Beijing.

Moreover, a massive problem that remains unaddressed is how Romney proposes to increase the defence budget at a time when – if the debt and deficit issues are to be dealt with – programmes across the board will require cuts. Sustaining a forward posture with increased defence monies would require such devastating reductions in domestic programmes as to be politically unsustainable. Pressures from Republican tax cutters, deficit hawks and fiscal conservatives would be especially acute here.

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But even if a more or less coherent policy could be crafted in a context of budgetary pain and rising international challenges, it is not clear that the American people would endorse it. Romney's tribulations in the 2012 election have demonstrated how difficult his foreign policy 'sell' is currently, for three reasons.

First, the negative legacy of George W. Bush remains potent. The former president appeared only briefly with his father on a recorded video at the GOP convention, a stark contrast to Bill Clinton's primetime address at the Democratic convention the following week. While Bush's foreign policies have been defended by some, Romney clearly decided that memories evoking an era of two wars, regime change, idealistic promises to spread democracy and end tyranny, and the various other unpopular aspects of a militaristic policy were to be avoided. Romney occupied the unpromising position whereby attacking Obama from the right risked casting himself in the Barry Goldwater role of 1964 – as too reckless, inexperienced and trigger happy to be a mature and responsible C-in-C – while failing to do so left him merely as a pale echo of the incumbent.

Second, Obama has a respectable and popular foreign policy record to defend, at least in terms of the headline items: killing Bin Laden, ending the Iraq war and drawing down in Afghanistan, toppling Colonel Gaddafi in Libya, and (selectively) assisting the Arab Spring. As I have argued elsewhere, a closer inspection of Obama's policy record reveals it to be much weaker and open to ample criticism than is commonly thought. Nonetheless, it is difficult to cast the president as 'soft' on matters of national security. Indeed, it is Obama who has made light of his opponent's thin international resume and criticising 'America's closest ally' at the London Olympics. Opinion surveys through 2012 suggested that more Americans approved than disapproved Obama's record on foreign policy, and when it came to specific issues such as handling terrorism, Obama easily outdistanced Romney in public confidence.

Third, highlighting foreign policy is problematic for Romney since Obama's weakness is so clearly his economic record. For Romney, framing the election as a referendum on the incumbent made perfect sense. But, when this failed to gain him ground, his selection of Paul Ryan rendered the race a choice of two competing visions. Not only, arguably, did this expose his own weaknesses, but it also allowed Obama to raise the contrast between his own record as Commander-in-Chief and his opponent's thin credentials. Romney's mishaps, on his summer trip to the UK, Israel and Poland, and his response to the US Embassy protests in Cairo, compounded the apparently unflattering comparison. It is hardly surprising that the Republicans remain more passionate about a Reaganite past than a Romney future.

Conclusion: Policy Continuity Amid Political Polarisation

Much recent commentary has analysed the nature of partisan polarisation in the US, its sources and consequences. On international issues as well as domestic, it is clear that the parties have shifted apart by some distance on issues such as trade, the environment, and even Israel.

But regardless of the coherence or clarity of a party's general approach, the key determinant of US foreign policy invariably remains presidential leadership. And, as Obama's continuation of many Bush era policies has shown, presidents face challenges and limits in office that can belie the sharp rhetoric of the campaign trail. As David Milne has recently argued in *International Affairs*, Obama and Romney are – for all their manifest differences – essentially both pragmatists. It is doubtful that the more colourful advisors to the Romney campaign would, as has been suggested by some alarmists, really be in powerful positions (John Bolton for Secretary of State, anyone?). That Romney appointed Robert Zoellick as the head of his foreign policy transition team, much to the outrage of some neo-conservatives and hawks who viewed him as too accommodationist in temperament, was illustrative. A Romney presidency would, like Reagan and George W. Bush before him, have to attend to party management, placating the different tendencies within the current GOP. As a declining, elderly and disorganised group, few prominent realists would likely gain the top decision-making posts, but at the same time erstwhile hawks, nationalists and neo-cons would likely, in office, be 'captured by reality.' Regardless of who gives the Inaugural Address in 2013, continuity rather than change is likely to characterise US foreign policy during the next four years.

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[1] A James Reichley, 'The Future of the Republican Party', chapter 4 in Joel D. Aberbach & Gillian Peele (eds.), *Crisis of Conservatism? The Republican Party, the Conservative Movement and American Politics After Bush* (OUP, 2011)

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