

Anticipating a Romney Foreign Policy

Written by Glenn Hastedt

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GLENN HASTEDT, OCT 21 2012

Anticipating how Mitt Romney's foreign policy might differ from that of Barack Obama is an exercise in forecasting that must be approached with caution. Consider that arch cold warrior Ronald Reagan ended his presidency with a foreign policy derided by some conservatives as "Carterism without Carter." Presidential candidate George W. Bush spoke about the dangers of engaging nation building yet his administration engaged in massive nation building projects. Obama promised that if elected he would redirect United States foreign policy. An initial flurry of highly publicized speeches suggested this would be the case but four years later many observers see far more similarities than differences in his and Bush's foreign policy.

Romney's Foreign Policy

We begin our search into what type of foreign policy to expect from a Romney presidency by reviewing key foreign policy themes his campaign has developed.[1] Romney pledges to use every measure to protect the United States and "prevent the worst from happening while there is still time." He criticizes Obama's foreign policy for its lack of consistency and tendency to drift from crisis to crisis. In its place he promises a militarily stronger America. The U.S. will exercise its power to lead, he proclaims because "God did not create this country to be a nation of followers." He promises an American century, where "America leads the free world and the free world leads the world." In particular, Russia and China are singled out as targets of this new stronger and more decisive foreign policy. Romney also pledges loyalty to allies, in particular Israel who he argues Obama has "thrown under the bus." Following the attack on the American Embassy in Libya, Romney further criticized Obama for having a reactive foreign policy and promised one that would not be conducted "at the mercy" of events abroad. He also rejected Obama's characterization of the anti-American protests and other events in the Middle East as "bumps in the road" on the path to democratization.[2] What are we to make of this? His foreign policy promises a degree of foresight that is unobtainable no matter how many dots one connects. The more relevant question is to what extent can we expect a foreign policy that differs from that of Barack Obama?

Places Not to Look for Predictions

We need to be selective in where we look for answers. We can begin by eliminating some places. Commonly used sources of predictive statements falling into this category include: party platforms, foreign policy campaign rhetoric, pre-presidential statements, and the identity of foreign policy advisors.

Foreign Policy Campaign Rhetoric

Perhaps the most common place to look for insight is the foreign policy campaign rhetoric of the presidential candidate. Two different logics underlay rhetoric in presidential campaigns. During primaries the purpose of rhetoric is to distinguish oneself from others who seek the nomination. During the presidential campaign rhetoric is used to appeal to the uncommitted voters at the center of the political continuum. Neither of these logics necessarily lends itself to predictable post-election policy positions. Unyielding and uncompromising language dominate primary speeches as candidates seek to identify themselves with a particular cause or position dear to the party faithful. Since policy differences are not pronounced at the political center, concrete foreign policy statements are kept vague and limited. This limits their predictive value except for when a foreign policy crisis emerges early in an

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administration.

In the 2008 presidential campaign, aside from Iraq, few major differences existed between John McCain and Barack Obama. Both agreed on the need to send troops to Afghanistan and neither described how U.S. forces would leave Afghanistan. A similar pattern is emerging in 2012. While Romney has not been hesitant to critique Obama's foreign policy, he has offered few concrete alternatives. He has criticized Obama's decision to bring troops home from Afghanistan but supports withdrawal, saying only he will reassess the situation once in office. Both wish to stop Iran's nuclear program and neither rule out the use of military force.

Where Romney has spoken out most forcefully is with regard to highly visible issues such as Russia, China, Israel and the recent the anti-American rioting in the Middle East. The purpose here is not so much to present alternatives as to try and convince the public that he is more competent or more likely than Obama to protect the "American national interest," a term with little concrete meaning but one that is filled with powerful images and a carries sense of urgency. In 2004, Bush was able to exploit his incumbency to establish an image of competency and experience on foreign policy matters that John Kerry's campaign could not effectively counter. Romney and Ryan's foreign policy inexperience has created problems for them here. A public opinion survey carried out after the conventions showed Obama leading Romney on foreign policy issues by 12 points.[3]

The need for presidential candidates to assert their skills in handling foreign policy problems came into clear view in September 2012. First, the Romney campaign argued that Obama's remarks about Romney's lack of foreign policy experience was an attempt to detract attention from his economic record.[4] After the U.S. embassy was attacked in Libya and the ambassador killed, Romney switched tactics and criticized Obama for what he labeled as "disgraceful" comments. Obama responded by condemning Romney for engaging in a political attack.[5]

The Republican Party Platform

What is held for foreign policy campaign rhetoric is also true for party platforms. The platform section of the Republican Party is entitled "*American Exceptionalism*" and begins by proclaiming, "we are the party of peace through strength" and firmly ties the GOP's foreign policy to Cold War period and Ronald Reagan. It begins by critiquing Obama for a failed foreign policy and then proclaims its unity with American military forces, their families and veterans before going on to extol American generosity and support for human rights. It calls for American leadership in international organizations along with chiding the United Nations for its "dire need of reform." The platform concludes with an around the world tour of issues that demand American attention.

Party Platforms offer little guidance to the future because they are not intended to be concrete action plans. They are political documents written to unite the party behind a candidate and cast ones own candidate in the best possible light. For example, GOP platform critiques of sequestration and the lack of action on cyber security do not make mention of Congress' role in these policy areas. Opposition to the new START Treaty ignores the fact that all five living Republican secretaries of state have endorsed it. Moreover, platforms do not necessarily reflect the party candidate's views. The Republican platform states it was "not authorized by any candidate." Speaking with reference to the Republican Party's anti-abortion stance, RNC Chairman Reince Preibus affirmed this position noting "this is the platform of the Republican Party; it is not the platform of Mitt Romney." [6]

Pre-Presidential Campaign Statements

Third, we cannot look to pre-presidential campaign writings and speeches. Traditionally this is a place where scholars have sought out clues to the true foreign policy thinking of presidential candidates.[7] This strategy worked because at one time most presidential candidates had lengthy records of public service in Washington. We now see presidential candidates coming out of governorships or state legislators with relatively short periods of apprenticeship in Congress or foreign policy issues. Obama fits this new pattern in 2008 as does Romney in 2012. It has been argued that not since the 1948 Thomas Dewey-Earl Warren ticket have Republican candidates shown such little foreign policy experience.

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Foreign Policy Advisors

Finally, much is often made of who presidential candidates select as their foreign policy advisors. Their identities provide more insight than do the earlier writings and statements of presidential candidates because they have a more visible foreign policy track record. But as with campaign rhetoric and platforms, their position as advisors holds as much to promoting intra-party unity as it does to formulating a foreign policy agenda; making their impact on policy not easily predetermined and resting heavily on circumstances and events such as 9/11. In George W. Bush's 2000 presidential bid, his foreign policy advisory group contained pragmatists such as Richard Armitage, Condoleezza Rice and Stephen Hadley and neoconservatives such as Richard Pearle and Paul Wolfowitz. As a group, Barack Obama's foreshadowed the emergence of the Obama administration's early pro-human rights and conciliatory declaratory foreign policy but their identities were less able to predict his administration's more pragmatic action foreign policy that became pronounced over time. Even more importantly, such a focus would have been of little value in anticipating his selection of Hilary Clinton as secretary of state.

Mitt Romney's foreign policy advisory group suggests a similar balancing of interests within the Republican Party. The traditional GOP establishment is represented by Henry Kissinger, George Shultz and James Baker. The neo conservative wing of the party is represented by among others John Bolton, Michael Hayden and Michael Chernoff. The pragmatic center can look to Condoleezza Rice and Robert Zoellick.

Places Where to Look for Predictions

Where then does one look for insight into the shape of Romney's foreign policy? Four topics should command our attention: the shape of post election domestic politics, domestic politics abroad, past Republican foreign policies, and the timing of crises.

Post-Election Domestic Politics

A starting point is domestic politics. Mitt Romney can expect to enjoy a honeymoon period where he has the support of all Republicans in Congress. But this will pass and the divisions within the party that are evident in the range of views found among his advisors will surface. Additional divisions will also surface, such as from Tea Party activists whose agenda contains both a neo-isolationist element and a strong nationalist pro-defense element that favors cutting the defense budget. Romney's ability to redirect American foreign policy in either words or deeds will be limited by his ability to keep the GOP united.

Foreign Domestic Politics

We can also look to foreign domestic politics. Leaders need followers and getting opponents to adjust their policies requires the ability to retreat. Neither is guaranteed. The domestic politics of other states will play a major role in the ability of Romney to exert leadership over allies and get opponents to back down. Bruce Jentleson points out that for many states, the United States is no longer the central focus of their foreign policy.[8] U.S. calls for action and support take second place to the pursuit of their own national interest in a world that looks increasingly non-polar. While many U.S. allies in Asia welcome an increased U.S. presence to counter China they also fear an overbearing U.S. presence in the region. Pressuring opponents is complicated by the fact that in some cases (China and North Korea) leaders are new; in others, visions of an American Century are matched by competing visions of grandeur (Russia and Iran) thus foreign leaders may have neither the desire nor ability to retreat in the face of American pressure. Bold rhetoric may thus produce push back, which will force either the abandonment of the rhetoric or follow through which could splinter the Republican Party or produce an unwanted foreign policy crisis.

The Past

We might look to the past. Mitt Romney may lack foreign policy experience but the Republican Party has foreign policy experience. Colin Dueck asserts that four tendencies have dominated past Republican foreign policies: hawk, nationalist, anti-interventionist, and realist.[9] In assessing the state of Republican foreign policy today Dueck

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suggests that realism and anti-interventionism are in decline within the GOP and that we should expect to see a Republican foreign policy built around the positions of conservative hawks and nationalists.

The Timing of Crises

Lastly, we should look for clues in the timing of key foreign policy decisions: at what point in an administration does the problem arise.[10] Particularly important is the first year in an administration's life cycle. It is when (or if) a foreign policy crisis erupts early in Romney's term in office that we can expect to see the greatest influence of his public statements on foreign policy. Without a firm institutional, political or conceptual grasp of the direction it wishes to move in, new administrations are prone to turn back to (or be trapped by) their nationalistic and vague campaign rhetoric in formulating policy. Romney's talk of not apologizing, standing firm and American exceptionalism may push policies rooted in this rhetoric to the forefront producing a highly combustible mix if combined with an opponent whose rhetoric or need to establish his credentials in office is equally pressing. By the second year of an administration these dangers are seen to diminish as experience and pragmatism in dealing with foreign policy crises grows.

A Romney Foreign Policy

So given the above, what can we expect of a Romney foreign policy? In the tradition of the Republican Party we will quickly see a more nationalistic and hawkish rhetoric directed at U.S. "enemies." Some actions would be taken to lend credence to this rhetoric, such as backing off from arms control, highlighting cyber threats; and challenging China on international economic policy but in and of themselves they would not greatly redirect American foreign policy. Arms control is a dead issue given how divided the Senate is; Obama will act on cyber threats via an executive order, and economic quarrels with China are becoming routine. Another traditional target of increased U.S. nationalist and hawkish rhetoric is Latin America where Cuba remains a target of convenience and Hugo Chavez is an ongoing irritant. While this might strike a Romney administration as a politically and geo-strategically safe area to exercise such rhetoric it is uncertain how much political traction either home or abroad can be gained by doing so in a post Cold War era of globalization. It would also not be unreasonable to conjecture that heavy pressure to end communist rule in Cuba might not bring forward a "Cuban Spring" that might prove equally as difficult to control as the Arab Spring has proven to be thereby placing a major foreign policy challenge before Romney.

In places such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Arab Spring portion of the Middle East, events are moving largely beyond U.S. day-to-day control and dependable allies are in short supply making the exercise of leadership either from the front or the rear difficult to achieve. Virtually any action taken might cause political fissures within the Republican party to surface. European allies can also be expected to respond coolly to rising hawkish rhetoric and claims of American exceptionalism as they continue to wrestle with the Euro crisis.

The greatest potential for short term change would come with the onset of a foreign policy crisis either as a result of Romney foreign policy missteps or domestic politics abroad which trap the Romney administration into following through on its rhetoric in forceful fashion in order to avoid charges of being weak. Two involve situations where foreign leaders respond aggressively to Romney's rhetoric to solidify their own political positions. Russia and China fit this case as Putin continues to move against his opponents and a new Chinese leader is assuming power in a period of slowed economic growth. A third involves a foreign leader trapping Romney in his own rhetoric. Israel might do so by attacking Iran early in his administration leaving Romney no choice but to endorse the action. Short of that a significant change in U.S. policy toward Iran seems unlikely, as both Obama and Romney have drawn a similar line in the sand, one that is more distant than Netanyahu's line of possessing a nuclear capability.[11]

The combination of domestic politics in the U.S. and abroad may thus limit Romney's ability to bring about a change in American foreign policy that extends beyond rhetoric, especially one which seeks to impose an American interpretation on to events. In this his fate may be strikingly similar to that of Obama. He may start out to change the course of American foreign policy only to be pulled back from doing so.

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- [1] For statements by Romney see <http://www.scribd.com/doc/104221532/2012-Gop-Platform>;
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<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2011/10/07/text-of-mitt-romneys-speech-on-foreign-policy-at-the-citadel/>. Accessed on 9/10/12.
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- [4] <http://thinkprogress.org/security/2012/09/11/827951/romney-adviser-calls-foreign-policy-discussion-a-distraction/>. Accessed on 9/12/12
- [5] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/election-2012/wp/2012/09/12/romney-calls-obama-response-to-libya-attacks-disgraceful/>. Accessed on 9/17/12
- [6] <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0812/79938.html#ixzz265XHiE00>. Accessed on 9/17/12
- [7] Saunders, Elizabeth N. (2010) *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* . Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
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- [9] Dueck, Colin (2010). *Hard Times. The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy Since WW II* . Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- [10] Quant, William. (1986). "The Electoral Cycle and the Conduct of American Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 101: 825-837.
- [11] <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/09/romney-on-iran-share-same-red-line-as-obama/>. Accessed on 9/17/12.

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