

The Tea Party's Foreign Policy

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, SEP 21 2010

The first American Tea Party movement which gave us the American Revolution had huge international implications although like the current one it was initially overwhelmingly focused on narrow economic issues, especially taxation and the fear of big government. The question some are beginning to ask is: what are the likely international implications of the current American Tea Party which seems on the verge of giving the Republicans control in the new US Congress and blocking the Obama Revolution.

The Tea Party of today is a decentralized, growing political movement that developed in reaction to President Obama's expansive legislative agenda, primarily to his calls for bailouts for banks, insurance companies, and the automobile industry, health care reform, and carbon reduction mandates. It is a coalition of local and national groups that lacks the announced creed of a political party, but can fairly be described as opposing increased government spending on domestic programs, tax increases of any kind, and uncontrolled immigration. Its members are avowed populists who are disdainful of compromising "go along to get along" legislators and "arrogant" bureaucratic and media experts. Although drawing from the ranks of both main political parties and the unenrolled, it has found expression exclusively within the Republican Party where it has recently dispatched several senior figures in primary elections. If the Republicans do gain control of Congress, it will be because of the movement's energizing anger and the new faces it has brought into American politics.

Nearly absent from the many Tea Party rallies is a discussion of American foreign policy. Tea Partiers are clearly very patriotic and reverently respectful of the US military. They seem totally distrustful of President Obama and any of his actions foreign or domestic, but choose to attack almost exclusively those policies that are domestically focused. Their openly expressed fear is of an active and stronger federal government working to curtail the freedom of Americans, not of an America active abroad and promoting the freedom of others. They may not like such an America, but they say little about it.

What then can be gleaned on where this is taking us? There are a few Republican politicians –Sarah Palin and Senator Jim DeMint —and several national figures, most visibly talk show hosts—Rush Limbaugh and Glen Beck—who have championed the Tea Party cause and who have discernable foreign policy positions. Those who are elected under the Tea Party banner will not likely stray far at first from these positions which, as it turns out, are quite conventional Republican foreign policy views. With hardly any qualifiers, these Tea Party champions believe that America should stay super strong, hunt down al Qaeda and its affiliates, win in Afghanistan, keep Guantanamo open, stop apologizing, support Israel, box in China, be weary of Russia, stop Iran and North Korea, consume oil and other resources freely, be skeptical of those who say that we shouldn't, and have little to do with the United Nations, the French, and George Soros. They oppose arms control treaties, nation building, foreign aid, international courts, open borders, globalization, and any version of football that isn't American.

Problems will likely develop later, however, when Tea Party type representatives and senators have to make the cuts in government spending and revenues that they promise that they will make. Cuts will not come easily in entitlement programs, particularly health care. Health reform was offered on the false promise of future efficiency savings paying for benefit expansions. The repeal of health reform, if it occurs, will not yield enough savings to avoid mounting deficits. With tax increases an unacceptable alternative to, there is little fat of significance in the federal government's budget to go after beyond defense spending which has doubled since 9/11. Republicans in the past have chosen

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increased deficits rather than spending cuts. The Tea Party candidates promise the opposite.

You can cut defense spending if you cut America's security obligations or the ability to fulfill them. Vulnerable surely are the forces assigned to protect the Cold War's main victors—Europe and, in Asia, Japan and Korea. Tea Party people out of office may not know that most of these allies, though rich or nearly as rich as Americans, have cut their military capabilities substantially on the understanding that they were the permanent beneficiaries of America's security guarantees. In office they are bound to learn these hidden truths.

Vulnerable also are the regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan which have consumed unproductively the billions that America has poured into their countries in the hope of being set free from the security entanglements caused by our invasions. America thought it would be able to leave behind the gifts of democracy, peace, and prosperity as it withdrew its forces. After nearly a decade of fighting for less than stellar friends and less than obvious victories, we will likely be willing to settle for a lot less in terms of our bequests. The hunt for al Qaeda will not stop. We can always build better drones or drone equivalents. The nation building programs in the guise of counter-insurgency best practices likely will be stopped, however. At some point time will be up. The Tea Party candidates with their economic concerns will likely hasten that day.

Foreign aid and outreach to America's foreign critics will likely have no appeal. The Tea Party Americans are the Americans who oppose the expansion of domestic welfare programs. They surely will see no virtue in trying to buy friends in Asia and Africa through publically financed international good works. They are not opposed to private charities operating abroad. They just are likely to see no reason for their officials to be generous with tax money, especially when the giveaways are on the basis of some unproven theory about the value of winning hearts and minds in places far from home.

This does not mean that isolation that lies ahead for America. Americans benefit too much from free trade and their privileged position in world debates to decide to wall off totally the rest of the world. But the Tea Party is largely inward looking and largely uninterested in America's global security role. Burdens from that global role as they are identified are likely to be viewed expendable or of low priority. Economic fears are dominant and security ones are mostly considered to be important only as they are related to the borders and values. The choice between cutting spending at home and cutting spending abroad will be an easy one for the Tea Parters.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.