

The Partisan Foreign Policy Divide: Rhetoric or Substance?

David Shorr

It's been more than four years since the apparatus of US global power changed hands from one political party to the other. In the domestic political arena, the national security and foreign policies of the Obama and Bush administrations are posed as starkly different approaches to the world beyond America's borders. Should this contrast be accepted at face value?

Today's polarized politics make it an interesting moment to explore whether political disagreements really matter for policy. This is a debate over the very salience of recent foreign policy debates. As such, it is quite different from discussing the merits of the case for or against Obama or Bush. Many of the partisans who differ sharply on substance presumably agree that the debates themselves are worthy—that they are indeed substantive and relevant to the business of governing.

For someone who has been engaged in these political battles, particularly in the last two presidential elections, the most instructive thing may be to gauge their policy ramifications. What is at stake in the major recent debates that lie at the nexus of politics and policy? Have the litigants delivered well-matched arguments that indicate distinct alternative courses?

The Politics-Policy Nexus

Those who complain about the malign influence of campaigns oversimplify the relationship between politics and policy. Part of the problem is a tendency to judge political discourse by policy wonk

David Shorr is a career-long specialist and commentator on foreign policy who has advised Democratic congressional and presidential campaigns. He blogs at Democracy Arsenal.

standards of seriousness—i.e. viewing detailed prescriptions as the only legitimate form of substance. This misses the essential point about political salience: that it moves issues into the public square and lays them before a broader non-specialist audience. In the cases when policy specifics are prominent in the debate, it is usually because they connect to a broader politically sensitive dispute.

Answering the question at hand: yes, the 2009 change of party in power ushered in a marked shift in policy approach. The hot-button issues that define the partisan battle lines of foreign policy do indeed set parameters for governing as well.

Three ongoing disputes help highlight the politics-to-policy links—quarrels in which the author has been active, mainly in my personal capacity as a blogger:

- Firm, unyielding demands and maximal coercion as the keys to bending others to America's will—or dangerous delusions.
- Achieving US aims solely in conjunction with friends and allies versus the need to engage adversaries and competitors.
- The need for gestures or concessions in diplomatic efforts versus holding out for capitulation.

These are intertwined issues, three facets of the question of how much leverage the world's sole superpower can exert. Yet each pair of opposing viewpoints has been its own consistent thread in the contemporary foreign policy debate. The first concerns the United States' basic ability to mold events to its liking. The second is about the power of solidarity among the like-minded. The last focuses on the exigencies of diplomacy.

Questionable Continuity

Before delving into the three major strands of debate, though, a few questions regarding continuity versus change are worth addressing briefly. To start with, the biggest hurdle for the continuity argument is the Iraq War.

The problems are manifold. Invading Iraq was a gamble that went horribly wrong, with enormous cost to America's blood, treasure, and reputation. Arguably, our strategic circumstances have been shaped by the Iraq invasion as much or more than the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Between the doctrinal justification (preventive war) and political and intelligence machinations leading to the invasion, there are solid grounds for crediting the Bush administration as the war's main authors and owners. And as the below discussion indicates, the arguments presented by Republicans in the meantime hardly reflect a major revision of their foreign policy ideas.

The 'exhibit A' usually offered for Bush-Obama continuity is their purportedly similar counterterrorism policies, especially President Obama's use of drones. Somehow, the secrecy surrounding the drone program is the modern equivalent of enhanced interrogation and extraordinary rendition—a comparison that seems pretty strained. While both can be criticized as overly aggressive, the problems are hardly comparable. One runs afoul of basic norms against torture; the other is a technology with precision-targeting and extended surveillance capabilities that limit civilian casualties. This isn't to deny a degree of continuity between the administrations, on executive powers and secrecy particularly. But it is quite a stretch to lump together the president who sends drones to individual houses in Pakistan and Yemen with the one who invaded Iraq.

A final introductory point concerns the common tendency to downplay political arguments as indicators of policy. Let's term this the *heated rhetoric discount* or *contrast inflation*. The underlying idea is reasonable enough: because governing usually involves constrained options and tougher choices, policy often diverges from political rhetoric. Yet the politics-policy distinction can be taken too far. Duly noting that political talking points can be impractical as policy guidelines; nonetheless, policy decisions are not insulated from public debates on the issues. This is the essence of political sensitivity.

The political debate over foreign policy is less a duel of rival 10-point plans than a struggle to determine which approaches are generally considered sensible, and which wrongheaded. The idea of "policy space" is decision

makers' degree of latitude—their room for maneuver without opening themselves to significant criticism or controversy—and it is determined by politics.

The closest thing the author could find to an examination of this during the presidential campaign was in a [Dan Drezner blog post](#):

If one pushes past the overheated rhetoric, then you discover that Romney wants a lot of the same ends as Barack Obama -- a stable, peaceful and free Middle East, for example. But that's not shocking -- any major party president will want the same ends. The differences are in the *means* through which a president will achieve those ends. And -- in [op-ed](#) after [op-ed](#), in [speech after speech](#) -- Romney either elides the means altogether, mentions means that the Obama administration is already using, or just says the word "resolve" a lot. That's insufficient.

Writing roughly a month before the election, Drezner called the candidate and campaign to task for trying to skate by with an ill-formed foreign policy platform. Whether the result of inattention or internal dissension, the Romney camp didn't do their homework. As damning as that sounds, though, this sin-of-omission critique of Team Romney for dropping the ball understates the problem with the Republican argument.

Fast-forward three months, and [Drezner stops being so polite](#):

The 2012 election was the nadir of the GOP's decadelong descent. By the time Romney was selected as the nominee, Republicans had come to talk about foreign policy almost entirely as an offshoot of domestic politics or ideology. What passed for discussion consisted of a series of tactical gestures designed to appease various constituencies in the party rather than responses to actual issues in U.S. relations with the world. The resulting excess of unchecked pablum and misinformation depressed not only outside observers but also many of the more seasoned members of the Republican foreign policy community who took the subject seriously.

Long before 2012, the loudest voices on one side of the national conversation on foreign policy had talked their way into a restrictive ideological box. And Drezner was hardly the only expert in the Republican camp to vent frustration in a post-election post-mortem. [Daniel Larison of](#)

[The American Conservative](#) threw the [words of American Enterprise Institute's Danielle Pletka](#) right back at her:

The “painful” and “often incoherent” attempts to attack Obama on foreign policy and national security did not come out of nowhere. In most cases, Romney’s criticisms of Obama’s record were taken directly from common movement conservative arguments. On everything from his obsession with the 2009 decision on missile defense to his mindless Russophobia to his automatic support for Israeli policies to his complaints about Obama’s response to the Green movement, Romney was serving as little more than a conduit for prevailing Republican foreign policy arguments. There’s no denying that these arguments were often painfully bad and incoherent, but the poor quality of these arguments can’t be pinned solely on Romney or his campaign staffers. Many of the people who presume to speak for the party on matters of foreign policy crafted those arguments, and they are responsible for them.

What does this critique mean for the foreign policy debate in our two-party system—and, by extension, the continuity thesis? Given the severity of the GOP’s prevailing orthodoxy, the claim that the parties are alike means applying a steep discount to conservative rhetoric. (Hyper-inflation of the contrasts?)

As goes US domestic policy and politics, so goes the national security discourse. The growing dominance of movement conservatives over the Republican party, accompanied by intense discipline and mistrust of moderates, has had serious consequences. When our two-party system is at its healthiest, the center-left and center-right parties hash things out “between the 40 yard lines.” Today, one of the major parties is nowhere near midfield, having staked out positions that hardly qualify as center-right.

The pragmatic conservative foreign policy specialists are still around, yet their voices have been drowned out. What has the debate sounded like without them?

American Decline or Omnipotence?

A wise former colleague used to warn against viewing other nations merely as objects of US foreign policy. Woe unto the policy maker whose facile assumptions count on other players to tailor their actions to America's specifications. Which raises the overarching question of recent foreign policy debates: how can the world's sole superpower best influence the international state of affairs?

Here the two sides have diametrically opposed views of the main challenge policy-makers face. Over on the right, the chief concern is over a loss of nerve. The way for the United States to get what we want is to insist on it—wielding American power through coercive measures and the inherent authority of the leader of the free world. The Republican diagnosis for policy failure and critique of President Obama apply the same logic. Whenever US policy meets with resistance and relevant players aren't getting with the program, it is because the policy lacks fortitude. The slams against Democrats for apologizing for America and welcoming its decline are thus consistent with a foreign-policy-as-bulldozer doctrine.

From the Democratic vantage, belief in America's moral authority and material might isn't the issue. Contrary to Republican spin, there has not been a crisis of confidence among foreign policy hands in the Democratic camp. Instead, we've been wrestling with the question of what all that American power and virtue gets us. The concern here is about self-absorption rather than self-doubt. In the following passage from their *End of Arrogance* book, Bruce Jentleson and Steven Weber explain the difficulty with trying to use American righteousness as a basis for foreign policy:

In a complex and rapidly changing environment it does not work well to repeatedly reinforce who we are and what we stand for. We know those

things, and we know how they shape what we do, how we act, how we respond. Strategy is ultimately about how we influence what others do.¹

Their point is pretty rudimentary: the true test of a policy's effectiveness should be the response of other players, not its constancy or fidelity to America's best traditions. And these alternate views of effectiveness naturally produce contrasting policy styles. Where Republicans craft their policies to be as resolute as possible, Democrats instead work at making theirs conscientious. This emphasis on diligence is predicated on three key concerns: to be realistic about leverage, alert to potential unintended consequences, and self-aware about arousing resistance.

So if the above aptly depicts a major battlefield of the political / policy debate, then we should be able to find matching rhetoric and policy critique. Start with these lines from a [major Romney foreign policy address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars](#) in July of 2012:

It is a mistake – and sometimes a tragic one – to think that firmness in American foreign policy can bring only tension or conflict. The surest path to danger is always weakness and indecision. In the end, it is resolve that moves events in our direction, and strength that keeps the peace.

I will not surrender America's leadership in the world. We must have confidence in our cause, clarity in our purpose, and resolve in our might.

With the deletion of just the word *only*, the first sentence could serve as a fair synopsis of the political divide. No one in the Democratic foreign policy establishment has argued that a bulldozer-style policy always worsens matters, but yes, it surely can. And then looking past the loose talk of weakness and surrender, Romney's emphasis on *firmness*, *clarity*, and *resolve* (twice) indeed sets the terms of debate quite similarly to the present author. [The Republicans have made such a habit of crying "resolve!" that [starting in Spring 2012](#),² the author has ridiculed their

¹ Bruce W. Jentleson & Steven Weber, *The End of Arrogance: America in the Global Competition of Ideas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 157.

² Links to a couple of the author's Democracy Arsenal blog posts have been inserted into the text.

seeming belief in the word's magical powers to produce foreign policy success.]

The 2012 campaign also saw some interesting attempts to apply the resolute approach to specific cases. Recalling the above point that the flaw in any deficient policy is a lack of backbone, Republicans should always be able to show how they'd boost a policy's resolve quotient, regardless of what has already been tried. The resulting difficulties can be seen in [Former Bush National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley's August 16 Washington Post op-ed on Syria](#). Hadley's main overall charge to the Obama Administration was a hazy call for a "much more active Syria policy." The notion of a pronounced shift was further undermined in Hadley's eight bullet points. It was clear for the first three—given their use of verbs like *expand*, *increase*, and *accelerate*—that he was proposing adjustments to existing policy rather than genuine alternatives. Then in another bullet point about cooperation with the Syrian opposition and regional players to prepare for post-Assad, Hadley credited Secretary of State Clinton for an initiative that she had already launched.

Friends and Enemies

The second major strand of debate concerns democratic solidarity as a basis for foreign policy. The Republican argument has portrayed a strategic either-or choice of the nations with which America will work: its friends/allies or adversaries/competitors. In an [August 2012 piece for ForeignPolicy.com](#) Romney campaign surrogate Sen. John McCain put it this way:

Republicans recognize that our first responsibility is to our allies and partners and that our president should never appear more eager to engage with our enemies than to deepen ties with our friends.

And former Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice expressed a similar view in her Republican National Convention](#) address:

Indeed that is the question of the moment- "Where does America stand?"
When our friends and our foes, alike, do not know the answer to that

question – clearly and unambiguously — the world is a chaotic and dangerous place. The U.S. has since the end of World War II had an answer – we stand for free peoples and free markets, we are willing to support and defend them – we will sustain a balance of power that favors freedom.

For one thing, the Rice quotation is a prime example of the “knowing what we stand for” idea that Jentleson and Weber countered in the passage cited above. But if the previous debate strand dealt with what superpower-dom gets us, here the question is what alliances of the like-minded get us. In other words, it's a debate not about whether alliances are valuable but how far that value extends. Can the United States achieve its international aims by standing shoulder-to-shoulder with allies such that cooperation with non-allies is counterproductive?

Secretary Rice's phrase about a balance of power favoring freedom (echoing a 2000 Foreign Affairs article she wrote on behalf of the Bush campaign) gives a glimpse of the contrast in perspectives. For Republicans, the key to blunting the world's dangers is for democratic nations to draw on their fundamental strengths and enlarge their numbers. Harkening back to the Post-War / Cold-War strategy, the Free World should maintain the geopolitical upper hand—thereby fending off challenges and highlighting the weakness of undemocratic systems.

Most foreign policy thinkers in the Democratic camp would agree with this strategy as a big-picture vision and a way to build global peace and prosperity over time. Yet we see this allies-adversaries dichotomy as badly mismatched for so many of the United States' key near- and intermediate-term international challenges. Preservation of strong alliances is a necessary but insufficient foreign policy task in the 2010s.

When President Obama couches his diplomatic priorities in terms of shared interests, as he often does, it is because the world's key players share stakes in the major items on the international agenda. This reality is clearest when one ponders the world's future if problems are left to worsen, rather than being addressed collectively by powerful nations. A world with 15-20 nuclear-armed states and a 3-4°C temperature rise will

have widespread repercussions, for liberal and autocratic regimes alike. The same goes for any persistent weakness in the global economy or a rash of terror attacks. Both for rising as well as established powers, democratic or undemocratic, a major challenge in the coming years will be to avoid tragedies of the commons.

And even a cursory review shows how the political alignments for key issues are highly fluid, rather than following a clear allies-adversaries divide. Taking the energy sanctions against Iran as an example, the Obama administration needed the cooperation not only of China but also India and close US allies Japan and Korea, all major consumers of Iranian energy.

The aftermath of the 2008 financial meltdown is another interesting case in point. At first, the major economies acted in unison—boosting demand with government spending and reassuring a shaky global financial system by filling IMF coffers. Starting in 2010, though, international politics were split by the same fiscal policy debate as US domestic politics. The governments taking the opposite approach to President Obama and pushing austerity included America's closest friends: Germany, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

A cynical view of non-allies also tends to overlook the instances when they take helpful stances. Beijing's decision to rebalance from China's heavy dependence on exports toward increased domestic consumption belies the notion of China as an implacable competitor. Skeptics of President Obama's reset of US-Russian relations gloss over NATO's Northern Distribution Network supply route into Afghanistan, a crucial alternative running through Russian rather than Pakistani territory.

More broadly, though, the right wing's distaste for cooperating with non-allies deprives the US of the diplomatic leverage that comes with "strange bedfellows." As with any political process, it is the [unexpected stances of key players that make a bigger impact](#) than predictable alignments (see author's blog post). So when a government supporting US position seems to act out of character, it can help the United States win the argument.

Negotiating from Fear or Fearing to Negotiate?

The challenge of Iran's nuclear program is paradigmatic for the interplay of politics and policy in recent years. Back during the 2008 campaign, the Obama camp recognized that Iran would be a key test once they took office. During the President Obama's first term the issue received utmost priority and effort, with administration policy bearing a distinct progressive stamp—and subject to matching criticism from the opposition. Then in the 2012 election, Iran was one of the most hotly debated foreign policy topics of the campaign.

The election-year politics of the issue were often quite transparent, explicit even. Democrats repeatedly goaded Gov. Romney and his surrogates on Iran, pressing for an admission that Republicans favored military action. The Romney camp objected, declaring their preference for a peaceful solution. This clash is the heart of the third major strand of debate: what sort of policies lead to diplomatic success rather than war?

Once again the debate is over constancy versus adroitness. Conservatives' prescription for Iran—hammered home in commentary, speeches, campaign messages, and sanctions proposals—stresses military moves to signal willingness to attack, ever-tighter economic sanctions, and a vague aura of seriousness and determination.³ Absent from these critiques is any pathway to an agreement to which the Iranians might, well, agree. The only apt word for this approach is *oxymoron*; Republicans want a diplomatic solution whereby Iran is coerced into capitulating.

The implications of the Republican stance are more than just a matter of details needing to be filled in. Start with the question of the intended outcome of US policy toward Iran's nuclear program—which can be described as keeping Iran from obtaining a “nuclear weapon” or, alternatively, a “nuclear capability.” At the center of the Iran controversy

³ The notable exception is the same aforementioned [Stephen Hadley's “Eight Ways to Deal With Iran,” at ForeignPolicy.com on September 26, 2012](#), which is a careful taxonomy of options rather than a prescription or surrogate's argument.

is a uranium enrichment complex that can produce grades of uranium for either civilian or military purposes. Yet the term *capability* is so broad that it might rule out Iran conducting any enrichment, even to lower grades that would keep Iran on the permissible side of the civilian-military line.

Any diplomatic deal with Iran will include intrusive verification measures so the outside world can closely watch what is happening there. The bigger question concerns the enrichment process that Iran would never agree to abandon; what grade of enriched uranium would Iran be permitted to produce, and in what quantities? While the Obama administration has stopped short of explicitly affirming a willingness to go along with continued enrichment, it has offered very clear hints. On the Republican side, until they specify what they mean by their opposition to a “nuclear capability,” their policy leaves no room for a diplomatic agreement. This was the basis for the Obama campaign’s political attack against Republicans, calling on them to admit favoring war.

The debate over economic sanctions reveals related policy fissures. Just to review the basics, sanctions policy is aimed at Iran’s eventual cooperation, but meanwhile depends on the assent of other players to be effective. In a strict sense, recent rounds of economic sanctions passed by Congress and signed by the president are unilateral. Based on the America’s position at the center of the global financial system, they pressure Tehran indirectly by prohibiting other countries that do business with Iran from conducting financial transactions in the United States. Beyond other nations’ general view of sanctions as heavy-handed, the Iran situation poses added problems relating to its role as an energy supplier—and the world (and American) economy’s dependence on fossil fuels. Congressional legislation dealt with the issue by requiring only that major customers of Iran such as China, India, Korea and Japan reduce rather than cut off those imports. Between this cooperation with key Asian players and a June 2010 UN Security Council resolution providing for such national-level sanctions, they are considerably less unilateral than they seem.

So then, what are the underlying issues of the sanctions debate? Obviously the sanctions on Iran have been ratcheted up a notch or two at a time over many years, begging the question of when they should be tightened and by how much. To the extent that other nations' cooperation is vital, the US must bring them along—careful not to get too far ahead of others' appetite for harsher measures. The recent sets of banking sanctions, in particular, could foster an image of the US as taking undue advantage of its financial might. Of course the needs to bring other nations along and avoid seeming heavy-handed do not really figure in Republican foreign policy calculations, which is why they always call for stronger sanctions.

This very issue arose in the [Obama-Romney debate on foreign policy](#), prompting President Obama to say:

And it turns out that the work involved in setting up these crippling sanctions is painstaking. It's meticulous. We started from the day we got into office. And the reason is was so important -- and this is a testament to how we've restored American credibility and strength around the world -- is we had to make sure that all the countries participated, even countries like Russia and China. Because if it's just us that are imposing sanctions -- we've had sanctions in place a long time. It's because we got everybody to agree that Iran is seeing so much pressure.

To which the author adds that in many exchanges with colleagues in 2009-10—in the blogosphere and in-person—I heard claims that China (and/or Russia) would never go along with tougher sanctions.

What Will We Tell the Voters?

Conceding a point to the continuity argument, a Republican administration might well follow a similar course to the current policy. Yet that depends greatly on which Republicans were appointed to key positions; there is certainly no reason to expect the party's fire-breathing wing to moderate. Indeed, last year Team Romney was reportedly split between pragmatic and dogmatic factions—with Robert Zoellick and John Bolton as the controversial figures in the opposing camps.

There may indeed be moderating influences that go with the exercise of power and real-world constraints, but it seems a tall order to expect them to negate the differences between the parties. If anything, Republicans have turned heel on the post-Iraq reassessment they began during the second Bush term.

Nor do Republicans need to push Iraq-style adventurism to offer a contrast. The invasion of Iraq was merely hubris in the extreme, the logical extension of bulldozer-style foreign policy. The three strands of debate outlined in this paper are wrestling with first-order questions about the best ways for America to shape world events. If negotiations with Iran start to gain momentum, for instance, the US and its international partners will have to offer sanctions relief in exchange for any significant Iranian gestures of good faith. As we saw, Republican critiques have left little room for compromise.

Then there are the ramifications of the continuity-vs-change debate for our democratic polity. At a time when the public square is bustling with big issues and opposing worldviews, it is odd to declare this a sideshow.

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