



The Emerging Conservative Playbook on National Security

Still Divided on National Security, Conservatives Lean Toward a Return to President George W. Bush's Misguided Approach

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Introduction

Conservatives remain sharply divided on the top national security issues of the day but they have coalesced around one rhetorical point: Over the past three years, President Barack Obama precipitated America's decline and endangered the country by projecting "weakness" to the world. Heavy on political talking points but light on realistic policy recommendations, the current conservative playbook on foreign policy remains largely unclear when it comes to offering practical solutions to the challenges America faces in the world.

For the past three years, rather than staking out clear policy positions, conservatives papered over their internal divisions on foreign policy by engaging in political positioning largely in opposition to President Obama's policies. A prime example of this was the national security sections of "A Pledge to America," the 2010 document published by the Republican House leadership—a scattershot list of political statements and some policy initiatives that played primarily to the party's conservative base. This document, with few pragmatic ideas on foreign policy, turned out to be a harbinger of what has emerged over the last year during conservative debates on national security.

The upcoming presidential debates on foreign policy this month offer an opportunity for conservatives to address their present disarray on national security. For the past few years, foreign policy took a backseat to jobs and the economy in America's policy debates. While conservatives remain more divided on national security than they've been for decades, they are trending toward what could be called Bush 2.0—a set of regressive foreign policy talking points grounded largely in opposition to the Obama administration but leaning toward taking America back to 2006, a low point when the Bush administration lost control of events around the world.

Here are brief outlines of leading foreign policy issues conservative thinkers and political leaders are prioritizing in their analyses and statements.

Iran

The latest U.N. report on Iran's nuclear program has thrust Iran back into the spotlight of America's political debates. Some conservatives question the implementation of existing sanctions and call for more severe ones to be enacted—even though other conservatives proclaim sanctions are futile. One central talking point among most conservatives includes intimations and outright calls for a U.S. military strike against Iran, usually to hit its nuclear program, but also recently as a form of retaliation for the plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to the United States.

Iran in conservative eyes is frequently seen as gaining from various events or actions that conservatives don't like, whether it is the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq or the political changes in the region. There are also some conservatives who attempt to spotlight Iran's links and connections in Latin America (such as with Hugo Chavez's Venezuela), as well as a number of whom have joined the lobbying campaign to de-list the Mujahideen-e-Khalq as a terrorist organization.

Iraq

Conservatives strongly associated with the Iraq War—primarily neoconservatives and former Bush administration officials, as well as conservative pundits who strongly pushed for and supported the war—claim that the Obama administration “lost” Iraq by withdrawing all U.S. troops from the country as stipulated by the security agreement signed in November 2008. The rationale for this contention appears to be that U.S. troops would have somehow served as a counterweight to Iranian influence, and that President Obama didn't try hard enough to negotiate a follow-up agreement allowing U.S. troops to stay there.

Israel

Conservatives accuse the Obama administration of “betraying” Israel for attempting to achieve a peace agreement leading to a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians, criticizing essentially every move or statement the Obama administration makes as anti-Israel.

Arab Spring

Conservatives are divided on the Arab Spring, with some applauding the overthrow of authoritarian U.S. allies such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and others claiming that they represent a gain for Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, or both. Among the former, there is an attempt to claim retroactive justification or credit for the Bush administration's “Freedom Agenda,” the rhetorical campaign to advance democracy in the Middle East. But the latter blame President Obama for “losing Egypt.”

Those who supported the overthrow later claimed that Iran was somehow benefiting because President Obama “wobbled” or showed insufficient resolve. Later in the year, conservatives fixated on Syria and the supposed failure of the Obama administration to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. Conservatives argued that Assad had to go, that the United States should recall its ambassador, and should institute even harsher sanctions against Syria than have been instituted. Iraq War supporters use the Arab Spring as a retro-active justification for their support of that war as well.

On Libya, conservatives were also divided, with neoconservatives and Iraq War supporters coming out early in favor of an aggressive military response to Qaddafi’s crackdown. President Obama’s failure to act when they wanted led to charges of “dithering” and “weakness.” Other conservatives dissented, arguing certain questions regarding intervention hadn’t been answered and would cost more money without serving U.S. interests.

Once the NATO campaign started, conservatives divided themselves between those who thought military action in Libya was unnecessary and those who favored a more aggressive approach. The latter charged the Obama administration yet again with “dithering” for fighting with allies rather than taking complete U.S. ownership of the conflict, and attacked multilateral action in general.

Many conservatives also were quick to proclaim U.S. policy a failure on these grounds almost immediately. They blasted House conservatives who joined an effort led by Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-OH) to cut off funding as “emboldening” Qaddafi. Once Qaddafi was overthrown, these conservatives simply reiterated their earlier complaints about burden sharing, asserted without proof that had their strategy been adopted, the war would have ended earlier, or denied that the war was a success for the administration.

U.S. defense budget

While some conservatives voice support for cuts to the defense budget, a coalition of establishment conservative think tanks (Heritage, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Foreign Policy Initiative) have mounted a campaign to prevent any cuts to the defense budget and instead focus on gutting domestic and social-insurance programs. They contend that future defense cuts (as envisioned if the congressional “super committee” deadlocks on a far-reaching budget deal by their November 23 deadline) will create a “hollow force” unable to deal with threats from China, Iran, Russia, terrorism, and other countries or tactics.

Many of these conservatives were willing to contemplate default rather than further cuts to the defense budget during the debt ceiling debate last summer.

Al Qaeda and terrorist networks

Some conservatives viewed the killing of Osama bin Laden as a political threat that could undermine their “war on terror” narrative, and took the occasion of his death at the hands of U.S. forces to reinforce the argument for the need to have an indefinite war against amorphous enemies. Alternatively, others attempted to use bin Laden’s killing to give credit to President Bush, the prison at Guantanamo Bay, or torture. Later, conservatives would use the 9/11 anniversary to retroactively justify the Bush administration’s policies in the “war on terror,” including torture and the invasion of Iraq.

Mainstream conservatives use the issue of terrorism to push for torture, keeping Guantanamo open, or score political points against the Obama administration for supposedly ignoring the threat of terrorism. The political focus on terrorism appears to have died down somewhat after the death of bin Laden, though conservatives continue to criticize President Obama for focusing on Al Qaeda at the expense of the broader array of terrorist groups they believe should be targeted.

At the same time, fringe conservatives have continued to flog the threat from Sharia and argue that the United States is engaged in a clash of civilizations with Muslims everywhere, especially within the United States itself.

Afghanistan

Conservatives are somewhat divided on the war in Afghanistan, with some (including pundit George Will) calling for a reduced commitment, but the majority of conservative thinkers are attacking President Obama for failing to follow the “advice of the generals” and outlining a timeframe for the drawdown of U.S. troops. Many conservatives accused President Obama of “playing politics” with his decision to draw down U.S. forces. Most conservatives argue that the United States will need to remain in Afghanistan for a long but indeterminate period of time in order to “choose victory.”

Russia

Conservatives are eager to claim that President Obama’s “reset” policy with Russia has failed for a variety of reasons, including Moscow’s continued human-rights abuses and the re-ascension of Vladimir Putin to the Russian presidency next year. Missile defense remains a core priority for conservatives as well.

Conclusion

With less than a year before the 2012 elections, conservatives remain divided on key foreign policy questions. On some leading issues like China and the global economy, conservatives have yet to fully articulate their positions. On others, such as Iran, Iraq, and the Middle East, many conservatives are gravitating toward a return to the approach of the Bush administration from 2002–2006, one that created the same problems that the Obama administration has worked to address. Conservatives are increasingly abandoning the tradition of conservative realism upheld by Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan during the Cold War, as well as turning away from the pragmatic approach of the George H. W. Bush administration that adeptly responded to the end of the Cold War and demonstrated resolve as well as restraint in the first Gulf War.

On foreign policy, today's conservative movement remains trapped in the legacy of the George W. Bush administration—a costly approach that undermined America's economic standing, leadership position, and moral authority in the world.

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