

National Security Note 2
The politics of US foreign policy
by Carl Ungerer

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17 August 2011

In the wake of a difficult and polarising Congressional debate over the US debt ceiling and Pentagon budget cuts, Washington turned its attention to the Republican race for the presidential election in 2012. This week the focus has been on Ames, Iowa, where Republicans have undertaken a straw poll among a growing list of declared and possible candidates. Michele Bachmann, Rick Perry and Mitt Romney emerged as leading contenders.

Although the global economy is dominating the current political debate, the presidency brings with it the responsibility of being the 'commander in chief'. Candidates who fail to demonstrate at least some familiarity with foreign and defence policy issues are often early casualties from these races.

In recent weeks, several US media organisations have run short profiles on the foreign policy credentials of each of the Republican candidates.

Two main themes emerge from these discussions. First, there is a growing isolationist sentiment among some of the leading candidates. In line with the Tea Party movement, both Michele Bachmann and Sarah Palin (who is yet to announce her candidacy) have argued strongly against all recent foreign military interventions, particularly the way in which the Obama administration and NATO have handled the Libyan conflict.

Both Mitt Romney and Rick Perry have suggested that the US should immediately withdraw forces from Iraq and Afghanistan. Slogans such as 'bring them home' and 'we don't do nation building' are likely to dominate future debates.

However, such neo-isolationism within the broader Tea Party movement is likely to conflict with the evangelical nature of their worldview. Palin has said that the US has a 'task from God' to spread democracy in the Arab world. Support for Israel is non-negotiable. But not all Republican candidates share this view. Jon Huntsman, a former US Ambassador to China has rejected isolationism as a foreign policy option for America.

The second theme concerns multilateralism. Republican candidates have been highly critical of the Obama administration's efforts to forge a new consensus on international arms control. Several, including Newt Gingrich, have indicated that they would wind back the terms of the New START agreement with Russia and return ground-based missile defence installations to Europe.

Others have suggested that the US should reduce its engagement with the United Nations organisation. Washington currently pays around 22% or US\$500 million of the UN budget each year. This funding will come under further pressure from Republican candidates in the coming months with the likely vote on Palestinian statehood.

As the Republican campaign for the presidency heats up, the Obama administration's foreign policy is likely to face increasing criticism. Cutting the Pentagon's budget is unlikely to draw a bipartisan consensus. And the rise of the Tea Party movement in Congress will constrain the White House's efforts to pursue a more assertive foreign policy agenda.

At the same time, Republican hawks will take any sign of a withdrawal of America's international commitments as an opportunity to undermine the President's credentials. According to some analysts, these cross-cutting agendas between the left and right will complicate the Obama administration's efforts to lead on foreign policy issues, and to manage its hopes of re-election in 2012.

About the author

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From July to December 2011, Carl is participating in a Fellowship with the Center for Australian & New Zealand Studies at Georgetown University in Washington DC. This *National Security Note* series provides 'on-the-ground' insight into the national security challenges and opportunities facing the United States during this time.

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