



Worrisome Belligerence: GOP Presidential Candidates and Foreign Policy

Ted Galen Carpenter - U.S. and the World - 15/2/2012

Foreign policy has not featured prominently in the campaign among Republican candidates for the presidential nomination. That may be a blessing in disguise. On the relatively rare occasions when those aspirants for the White House do address foreign policy topics, it is enough to make intelligent voters wish that the candidates would stick to domestic topics. With the notable exception of Congressman Ron Paul – who has almost no chance of getting the GOP nomination – all of the candidates have embraced an alarming, reckless belligerence.

One manifestation is the repeated allegation that President Obama engages in “appeasement” toward America’s adversaries. Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, and Newt Gingrich have all accused the president of “apologizing for America,” not standing by “friends and allies” and even “throwing allies under the bus,” in a futile effort to win favor with Iran, Pakistan, China, Russia, and other “hostile” powers.

The president has fired back at his opponents, suggesting that they ask Osama bin Laden and the 22 other high-level al Qaeda operatives who have been killed since Obama took office whether he is an appeaser. He has a point: the Republican appeasement charge is bizarre. The popular definition of appeasement implies a weak-kneed tendency to make far-reaching, unwise concessions to aggressors. But Obama sharply escalated the war in Afghanistan, has led efforts to impose harsher economic sanctions on Iran, and was the godfather of NATO’s military campaign to overthrow Muammar Qaddafi. That’s not exactly a record reminiscent of Neville Chamberlain.

Leaving aside the arrogant notion of the Republican presidential hopefuls that the United States is never wrong, and, therefore, should never apologize, it’s pertinent to wonder what the president has done that warrants allegations of appeasement. For the current crop of GOP contenders, merely exhibiting a willingness to negotiate with adversaries is evidence of weakness. And because Obama has attempted to open or advance dialogues

with such adversaries, Republican activists excoriate him. That is a very disturbing standard. If the GOP candidates believe that it is improper even to talk to hostile foreign regimes, they effectively eliminate diplomacy as a meaningful foreign policy tool.

And that worrisome mentality is on display with respect to specific issues, especially the Iranian nuclear problem. Romney, Gingrich, and Santorum all vie to see who can take the most uncompromising, saber-rattling position toward Tehran. Romney stated bluntly that Iran would never get a nuclear weapon on his watch. Gingrich and Santorum are even a shade harsher, arguing that it is time to consider air strikes to take out Iran's nuclear sites. Indeed, all three candidates advocate going far beyond the narrow objective of preventing Iran from gaining a nuclear-weapons capability. They want the United States to pursue a policy of forcible regime change.

In an effort to whip up support for military action against Iran, GOP presidential aspirants exaggerate to the point of absurdity the threat that a nuclear-armed Iran might pose. At a February 8 speech in Cleveland, Ohio, Gingrich admonished his audience to "think about the dangers to Cleveland, or to Columbus, or to Cincinnati, or to New York. Remember what it felt like on 9/11 when 3,100 Americans were killed. Now imagine an attack where you add two zeros. And it's 300,000 dead. Maybe a half million wounded. This is a real danger. This is not science fiction."

Such alarmism is a reckless effort to foment panic. Military experts conclude that even if Iran could enrich enough uranium to build a few nuclear devices, they would be primitive affairs with limited destructive capacity, not the massive city-busters that Gingrich implies. Moreover, it would be years before Iran could shrink the initial weapons enough to put on even short range missiles, much less ICBMs capable of reaching the United States. That danger is many years away, if it emerges at all. And the United States has a strategic arsenal with several thousand nuclear weapons to deter Iran or any other adversary.

Foreign policy jingoism surfaces with respect to other issues, especially relations with China. Mitt Romney has been especially hard-hitting. Pledging to "clamp down" on trade "cheaters," Romney added (to strong applause during a debate) that "China is the worst example of that. They have manipulated their currency to make their products artificially inexpensive." He also pledged to "go after them for stealing our intellectual property."

Such harsh rhetoric is not confined to trade and currency issues. Criticisms of China's human rights record and allegations that Beijing poses a security threat to the United States are also prominent. Both Gingrich and Santorum have blasted the Obama administration for not taking a more proactive stance on Beijing's human rights abuses, and they cite that as yet another example of the president's "appeasement" tendencies. One-time GOP presidential hopeful Michele Bachmann warned that "the Chinese just finished building 3,000 miles of underground tunnels where they are housing some nuclear weapons." Romney, Santorum and Gingrich all cite China's ongoing military modernization as a key reason why, they contend, the United States dare not make even

small cuts in its defense budget – even though Washington already spends five times more than Beijing.

Jon Huntsman, a candidate who dropped out of the race, found Republican party activists extremely hostile to his advocacy of cooperation with China. Indeed, his service as US ambassador to China and his ability to speak Mandarin were widely regarded as major negatives for his candidacy.

The prospect that a Republican president would exhibit strident belligerence in foreign affairs ought to be troubling not only to Americans but to populations around the world. It was hardly encouraging when his opponents criticized, and a debate audience soundly booed, Ron Paul's call for the United States to practice the Golden Rule in its conduct with other nations. Given the current crop of GOP presidential candidates, a new Republican administration would likely replicate George W. Bush's surly unilateralism that regarded military force as the first, rather than the last, resort. US foreign policy under Gingrich, Santorum, or Romney threatens to be Bush Jr.'s foreign policy on steroids.