

Return of the Cheap Hawk?

Why President Kasich might be bad news for the Pentagon

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Chris Christie wasn't the Republican governor with the most impressive re-election of the past couple years. That honor more properly belongs to John Kasich, who won a second term in November with nearly 64 percent of the vote.

Sure, New Jersey is a much bluer state. But as Ohio goes, so goes the nation. Kasich carried Cuyahoga County, a Buckeye State Democratic stronghold, even though his challenger was a county executive. He won 86 of 88 counties, 47 of them with at least 70 percent of the vote. It's not clear whether Kasich will run for president, but if he does he's likelier than Christie to deliver his home state's electoral votes.

Who would be more likely to deliver a realistic foreign policy? While Christie has made clear where he stands, taking shots at Rand Paul and "dangerous" libertarians inside the GOP, Kasich has mostly kept quiet on the subject as governor. The Ohioan once served on the House Armed Services Committee, but he was out of Congress by the time the Iraq War was authorized.

During Kasich's nine terms in the House, however, he characterized himself as a "cheap hawk." While many self-styled antigovernment Republicans of the 1990s treated the Pentagon as an honorary member of the private sector, Kasich didn't exempt the military budget from his zeal for spending cuts. He worked with left-wing California Democrat Ronald Dellums—nicknamed "Red Dellums" by Rush Limbaugh—to cancel the B-2 bomber.

Another bipartisan package of spending cuts Kasich pushed in the early 1990s mostly targeted domestic expenditures. But it would nevertheless have axed \$5 billion from NATO and other collective-security organizations and various weapons systems. The plan would have also deferred cost-of-living adjustments for military retirees under age 62. That was enough to get the American Legion to oppose the cuts, which the Clinton administration argued "would be a very, very severe blow" to the structure and morale of the military."

When Kasich rose to chairman of the House Budget Committee in 1995, after the “Republican revolution” of the previous November produced the first GOP majority in the chamber in 40 years, he fought to keep military spending under control. In what the Associated Press described as “a victory for deficit hawks over defense hawks,” Kasich pushed to have defense spending level off at \$270 billion a year by the end of the decade

“The plan eliminates a dip in the Pentagon budget proposed by President Clinton,” the AP reported, “but it still means the military’s buying power would decline because of inflation.” The Contract With America, by contrast, had endorsed a boost in defense spending, and some top Republicans had fought for more funds.

“It sounds like Kasich is standing firm and making a clear indication that [defense hawks] aren’t going to get the amounts of money they’ve been asking for,” an analyst with the Defense Budget Project was quoted as saying at the time. The AP preferred to describe it as a sign that “Republican leaders will not protect the Pentagon as they seek ways to balance the federal budget and cut taxes.”

Cooperating with the Clinton administration to eventually balance the budget and cut taxes—the biggest broad-based tax cuts since 1981 and first balanced budget since 1969, in fact—is Kasich’s legacy on Capitol Hill. But what about his cheap hawkishness? “In foreign and defense policy,” Kasich told the New York Times Magazine in 1998, “you have to look for the truth. You can’t listen to the flacks in the Pentagon and the hack ideologues over at party headquarters, or you’ll end up with a bunch of weapons that don’t work.”

Even then, Kasich could always be pragmatic. He and Minnesota Democratic Rep. Tim Penny decided to exempt current military personnel and federal civilian employees from their proposed retirement spending cuts, even though that lowered the projected deficit reductions from \$103 billion to \$90 billion. They hoped to get more hawkish Democrats and moderate Republicans to vote for the proposal, and that dilution was the price.

In 1995, Kasich sought an across-the-board 30 percent cut in foreign aid. But he exempted aid to Israel—which then included economic as well as military assistance—to avoid a rebellion by Christian conservatives and other lawmakers. In doing so, he avoided the problems Rand Paul encountered in 2011, when proposed eliminating all foreign aid.

But Kasich didn’t just nibble around the edges of an activist foreign policy’s expensive price tag. He was a vocal opponent of military intervention in the Balkans. As the Kosovo war escalated in 1999, Kasich introduced a resolution that would have required President Clinton to receive congressional approval before inserting ground troops. “We should avoid escalation in this conflict because the only rational and durable solution is one arrived at through negotiation,” Kasich said, according to the Toledo Blade. “There are far too many unanswered questions about the use of ground troops—questions that should require a full congressional debate.”

Kasich's antiwar resolution wasn't the toughest. California Republican Rep. Tom Campbell wanted to require a full congressional declaration of war in Kosovo. Failing that, he wanted to completely defund Clinton's military adventure. House Democrats, by contrast, were pushing resolutions endorsing the war. "My view is that the only thing that is likely to pass... is the [Kasich] proposal," then House Majority Leader Dick Armey said.

"I have reluctantly concluded that military intervention—through air power or ground troops—is not in the national interest," Kasich said at the outset in a New York Times op-ed. "The United States should encourage new attempts at a peaceful resolution, before this crisis flashes into a wider conflict." In another statement, he declared, "The administration to this day has never made clear, either to Congress or the American people, why U.S. intervention in this civil war is in the vital interests of the United States."

All of this, of course, happened in the 1990s. There was a Democratic president initiating these wars. Like President Obama, Bill Clinton was even less inclined to seek congressional approval for military adventures than George W. Bush would prove to be. While skepticism of Pentagon spending requests was still relatively rare, the Clinton-era GOP was having an anti-interventionist moment.

Pat Buchanan, a principled opponent of most post-Cold War military interventions, was the leading conservative candidate in the 1996 Republican presidential primaries. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and conservative commentators like Sean Hannity were adamant foes of the Kosovo war. Mainstream Republican presidential aspirants at the time sounded very much like Democrats later did under George W. Bush, after the Iraq War began going badly.

"I said 'no ground troops' before the bombing began," said Lamar Alexander in the embryonic stages of his 2000 presidential campaign. "That was for a peace-keeping force. If there were to be ground troops for that, those should have been Europeans." Dan Quayle was less equivocal. "I wouldn't have gotten us into this mess," the former vice president said on "Meet the Press" in 1999. "It's been a mistake from the very beginning."

Perhaps New Hampshire Republican Sen. Bob Smith summed up the opposition most pithily: "This is something that's not worth risking one drop of American blood for."

John McCain and George W. Bush were more hawkish on Kosovo, unsurprisingly. Steve Forbes wanted to arm the Kosovars. But the antiwar position was the consensus among Republicans at that time. It still predicted nothing about how Republicans would actually govern once they controlled foreign policy. The anti-interventionist mood in the GOP began to cool once a Democrat was no longer commander in chief and evaporated completely once the United States was attacked on 9/11.

The current anti-interventionist streak in party seems to be fading even before Obama leaves office, amid crises abroad that have yet to have any direct impact on the United States. And

Kasich is already a somewhat different figure as governor than he was as a leading budget-cutter in the House. Kasich's 1995 budget blueprint sought to restrain the growth of Medicare—a program Ronald Reagan mostly wouldn't touch—with cuts coming much faster than envisioned by Paul Ryan today.

But as governor, Kasich not only accepted Obamacare's Medicaid expansion, he rammed it through over Republican opposition in the state legislature, defending it as the right thing to do for Ohio and the poor and dismissing objections in terms he once would have reserved for liberal Democrats. Kasich described the opposition to expanded Medicaid as “really either political or ideological,” adding, “I don't think that holds water against real flesh and blood, and real improvements in people's lives.”

People once said the same things about Kasich's federal budget cuts, including the Medicare reforms that nearly blew up Newt Gingrich's revolution. Kasich has since found religion on entitlements. He recalled a conversation with a Republican state legislator who opposed the Medicaid expansion. He first invoked their mutual support for limited government and then the faith they had in common.

“Now, when you die and get to the meeting with St. Peter, he's probably not going to ask you much about what you did about keeping government small,” Kasich said. “But he is going to ask you what you did for the poor. You better have a good answer.”

This kind of rhetoric drives conservatives crazy. While a case could be made that he is channeling legendary Ohio conservative Robert Taft, who sometimes supported a stronger safety net for the poor to hold off bigger expansions of government that would benefit the middle class and affluent, many feel Kasich is abandoning his fiscal conservatism.

“As it stands, Medicaid already costs nearly twice as much annually as the Iraq War did in its most expensive year (\$258 billion vs. \$140 billion), and the program is rife with fraud,” National Review argued in an editorial. “It is in fact precisely the sort of wasteful and counterproductive program that intelligent governors of both parties should be seeking to reduce rather than to expand.

It's in keeping with a record in which Governor Kasich has been much more interested in cutting taxes than reducing spending. As a result, 20 Democrats ranked higher than Kasich in the Cato Institute's annual report card grading governors' fiscal performance. St. Peter may or may not be interested in what you did to keep government small, but Cato is.

Such shifts aren't exactly unheard of. Reagan was much tougher on deficits than taxes when he was governor of California. As president, he did exactly the opposite. But all this does raise questions about how relevant Kasich's 1990s record will be if he runs for president in 2016. Like Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, Kasich took on the state's public-sector unions and tried to

curb their collective-bargaining rights. But Kasich's reforms were repealed by Ohio's voters, while Walker survived a recall effort.

Some conservatives can't help but make a comparison to a Republican governor of California not named Reagan: Arnold Schwarzenegger took on his state's unions and was rebuffed by voters. After this setback, he moved left on a number of issues and was generally less combative. It got Schwarzenegger re-elected, but without much of a conservative legacy.
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The Constitution made a Schwarzenegger presidential campaign impossible. But the American-born Kasich could certainly run if he wants to. Is the Medicaid expander still a cheap hawk? It's hard to say. When he abandoned his run for the 2000 GOP nomination, which never really got off the ground, he declared Dubya his "soul brother." But that was "humble foreign policy" Bush, and it's clear that Kasich was talking about "compassionate conservatism" in domestic policy. (Paradoxically, that was a pose Bush adopted to distance himself from Kasich's budget-cutting.

Kasich was in the private sector when Bush's foreign policy became less humble. While he mostly toed the party line in his Fox News show "Heartland," which aired from 2001 to 2007, Kasich wasn't really animated by nation-building abroad. Since returning to politics, Kasich has frequently referred to the \$17 trillion national debt as the most pressing national-security problem. "It threatens to swallow us up," he said in a 2013 speech renewing his push for a federal balanced-budget amendment. "America has become a debtor nation. The Chinese have become a lending nation."

Sentiments like that made some neoconservatives wary of Indiana governor Mitch Daniels ahead of the 2012 GOP primaries. But Kasich today is definitely competing in the "Sheldon primary," wooing hawkish casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson, who is said to be specifically looking for a "mainstream" Republican presidential candidate who can stop Rand Paul.

Yet even when addressing Adelson at a Republican Jewish Coalition confab, Kasich kept his foreign-policy views relatively close to the vest and preferred to talk about domestic policy. When pressed in a question-and-answer session, he said hawkish things about sanctions on Iran and Russia, as well as the need to stay longer in Afghanistan. In his prepared remarks, however, Kasich was silent on these topics. While abandoning any pretense that the meeting was about something other than courting the man he repeatedly called "Sheldon," his stump speech wasn't much different from what he would have said in Columbus. At times, Kasich seemed more interested in getting Adelson to invest in Ohio than in winning his support for 2016.

"So in Ohio, we're no longer a flyover, Sheldon. We want you to come," Kasich said. "We want you to invest, and we want you to get to know us because Ohio really is the heart of it all. And it's the place of miracles. Just think about the University of Dayton in the Elite Eight."

Kasich has always been quirky, known for extended riffs on how God loves Pearl Jam—to whom Kasich once danced in a mosh pit with the soon-to-be infamous Rep. Gary Condit—and folksy talks about entrepreneurship. He was willing to team with liberals like Ralph Nader to fight corporate welfare before there was a Tea Party.

But on the big issues that divide Republicans and Democrats, Kasich was less idiosyncratic and more predictable. Perhaps even that is changing. “What I have said about Obamacare [needing to be repealed] is right, but I am the guy pushing Medicaid expansion, so try to figure me out,” he has said.

Try to figure Kasich out on foreign policy, too.