



Over the Horizon: GOP's Realist Shift Unlikely to Last

By [Robert Farley](#) | 06 Jul 2011

The Republican Party's [increasing divisions on foreign policy](#) have now moved beyond Tea Party-inspired financial grumbling to find their way into the race for the GOP presidential nomination. Could the party's 2012 nomination [turn on foreign policy](#)? If so, it would echo the 2008 Democratic primary campaign, in which foreign policy played an unusually strong role: Barack Obama is president of the United States today in large part because he opposed the Iraq War in 2003, compared to Hillary Clinton, who had been in favor of the war. However, supporters of a noninterventionist turn in the GOP are likely to be disappointed during the general election as well as by any actual Republican administration that might emerge from it: The intellectual superstructure of foreign policy thinking in the GOP remains firmly in the hawkish camp and will continue to reside there until the party's foreign policy realists build an institutional foundation of their own.

The battle lines in the GOP seem to be falling along "neoconservative" versus "realist" camps, although both terms are so loaded that they require considerable clarification. In broad strokes, the neoconservative faction tends to prefer a more interventionist foreign policy and a higher defense budget, while the realist faction is more skeptical of foreign intervention and talks seriously about cutting defense spending. Three issues currently distinguish the two factions.

The [emerging congressional opposition](#) to the Libya operation may provide a defining issue for the realists. The war is not particularly popular with the population at large, and Obama is extremely unpopular with the GOP electorate. For realists interested in the nomination, attacking the president on Libya -- as Rep. Michelle Bachman has done -- may prove profitable in both the primary and the general election.

GOP discord is not limited to Libya, however. It extends to the [ongoing military engagement in Afghanistan](#) as well. Having effectively taken ownership of the Afghanistan War, Obama has made himself vulnerable to attack from both the left and the right. Mitt Romney, for one, recently suggested that perhaps U.S. troops should be withdrawn from Afghanistan even faster than Obama has announced.

Finally, the size of the U.S. defense budget is a major concern for Tea Party conservatives. Several of them, not least Sen. Rand Paul, have seriously raised the possibility of cuts in the defense budget as part of a general strategy for reducing U.S. budget deficits. Think tanks and media outlets affiliated with the neoconservative faction, such as the Heritage Foundation, have reacted poorly to this development.

While we can think about these divisions in purely instrumental terms, it [is not quite fair to suggest](#) that "everyone's a realist when the other guy's in charge." The realist camp has a long and fairly rich history within the GOP, even if it found itself consistently outmaneuvered by the neoconservative faction during the first six years of the Bush administration. So the electoral appeal of a hawkish foreign policy position [may have been overstated](#). Enthusiasts of the Tea Party [seem comfortable with the idea of defense cuts](#). Indeed, public polling seems to indicate that cuts to the defense budget are broadly popular across the U.S. electorate. Moreover, given that Obama has not hesitated to apply U.S. military force in Libya and elsewhere, it is much easier to craft an attack on his foreign policy from a realist perspective than from a neoconservative one.

The idea of a brewing foreign policy conflict within the GOP has inspired a series of terrified reactions within the neoconservative camp. [Max Boot's recent article](#), titled "Republicans Wavering on Defense Spending?" fairly dripped with flop sweat. That panic only increased after Sarah Palin, who was essentially "discovered" as a major political actor by Weekly Standard editor William Kristol, broke with her neoconservative handlers earlier this year. To counter the growing impression that they are being abandoned, neoconservatives have returned to the well-worn tactic of insisting that relatively commonplace attitudes actually [represent adherence to their worldview](#). For example, neoconservatives were quick to claim former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty as one of their own after a recent foreign policy speech, even though Pawlenty [was reportedly trying to distance himself](#) from their faction.

However, the neoconservative faction has never had as much popular support as they appeared -- or claimed -- to enjoy. Recall that most major neoconservatives backed Sen. John McCain for the Republican nomination in 2000, believing that then-Gov. George W. Bush would too much resemble his father. What sets neoconservatives apart, though, is the intensity of their interest in foreign policy. Neoconservatives are also disproportionately likely to pursue foreign policy careers, meaning that the GOP foreign policy elite is heavily predisposed toward the hawkish position. Even realist presidents end up [bringing neoconservatives on board](#) as close advisers, and foreign policy specialists in conservative think tanks and at major conservative media outlets tend toward neoconservatism. Similarly, neoconservatives can be flexible on areas of domestic policy that are priorities for other elements of the Republican coalition, allowing them to strike deals when necessary.

Some realist counterinstitutions have emerged to challenge the neoconservative institutional "monopoly" when it comes to GOP foreign policy thinking. The libertarian-minded CATO Institute [argues for a much-curtailed U.S. global footprint](#), including a substantially reduced defense budget. One of Pawlenty's many campaign missteps thus far [involved some tone-deaf comments](#) he made on the defense budget at CATO earlier this year. Similarly, conservative realists have begun to develop robust journalistic outlets, such as the National Interest and American Conservative. The latter's Daniel Larison has [become one of the most eloquent critics](#) of interventionist foreign policies among both Republicans and Democrats.

However, it is probably too soon to expect the return of a "realist" foreign policy establishment in the GOP. As a result, the candidate that ultimately emerges victorious from the Republican primary will likely be broadly comfortable, if not enthusiastic, about the neoconservative approach to foreign relations. He or she will hedge sufficiently to fend off a realist challenge in the primaries, but will maintain connections with neoconservatives in the policy and journalistic community. Even if subsequently elected to the White House, however, no Republican is likely to undertake the extremely difficult project of reorienting the intellectual superstructure of the GOP foreign policy establishment in a noninterventionist direction. Much ink will flow, but in the short term, the foreign policy preferences of the GOP are unlikely to change in a major way.

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