

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Beyond Allies and Adversaries

by Ted Galen Carpenter - Thursday, November 1, 2012

Mitt Romney's generally lackluster performance in the presidential debate on foreign policy did feature a fairly spirited attack on the Obama administration's handling of Middle East affairs. The criticism reflected frustration that the new democratic regimes in the region appear to be decidedly less friendly to the United States than some of the authoritarian regimes they replaced. From Romney's stark perspective, there had been a loss of American "friends" and a corresponding proliferation of U.S. "adversaries."

His attitude is not confined to the Middle East. Romney has taken a confrontational stance [toward China](#) on both trade and security issues. And early in the campaign for the GOP nomination, he described Russia as America's principal geopolitical adversary. That description created an opportunity for Obama to provide [a withering rebuke](#) in the October 22 debate. "The 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back," Obama told Romney. "The Cold War's been over for twenty years."

Romney's perspective continues a long, unhelpful pattern in U.S. foreign policy. Since World War II, U.S. leaders have exhibited an unfortunate tendency to view other nations in binary terms, as either friends or enemies. Through the long decades of the Cold War, nonalignment was regarded as amoral neutrality at best and as a euphemism for implicit pro-Soviet policies at worst.

That attitude was most intense during the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower, with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles being especially outspoken in condemning countries that declined to side with the United States in its struggle against the Soviet Union. Neutrality, Dulles [contended in June 1956](#), "has increasingly become an obsolete conception, and except under very exceptional circumstances, it is an immoral and shortsighted conception." India's refusal to enlist in the U.S.-led containment strategy was a key reason for the frosty relationship that developed between Washington and New Delhi.

The binary approach to global affairs had unfortunate policy consequences in other respects. The inability of U.S. policy makers to accept the reality that a nation might wish to be neither friend nor foe led to CIA-orchestrated coups against the left-leaning but independent nationalist governments in Iran and Guatemala. Instead of tolerating such ideological ambiguity, the Eisenhower

administration viewed those regimes as nothing more than Soviet puppets and reacted accordingly.

Unfortunately, the binary attitude persisted long after the 1950s. It was a major factor that prevented the United States from recognizing that North Vietnam's communist regime was primarily nationalist and was not going to be a surrogate of either the Soviet Union or China. A similar blind spot impelled Washington to embrace such corrupt and thuggish "friends" as South Korea's Park Chung-hee, Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza and Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko.

Although the end of the Cold War produced a somewhat more flexible world view, the 9/11 attacks led to an immediate relapse. President George W. Bush epitomized the renewed rigidity. In an address to Congress and the American people on September 20, 2001, Bush [stated](#): "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists." A short time later, [he warned](#) other nations that they would be "held accountable for inaction" in the war on terror.

But the determination of other governments to balk at such a simplistic approach was even more pronounced than it had been during the Cold War. Even some long-standing U.S. allies — including France and Germany — refused to join Bush's invasion of Iraq. And over the past decade it has become clear that numerous rising powers, such as Turkey, Brazil and Indonesia, seek good relations with the United States but are not about to march in policy lockstep behind Washington.

U.S. leaders, in both the Bush and Obama administrations, have reacted badly to such manifestations of nonconformity. When Brazil and Turkey tried to steer a middle course regarding Iran's nuclear program, daring to offer a compromise proposal to defuse tensions, they received a curt, dismissive response from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for their labors. Russia and China became the target of a [nasty invective from the State Department](#) for having the temerity to oppose Washington's strategy for dealing with Iran and Syria.

Despite the ill-tempered responses of his State Department toward those countries, President Obama has shown flashes of understanding that the binary approach is counterproductive in dealing with a complex, politically diverse world. He created a stir a few weeks ago when he described Egypt under President Mohamed Morsi as neither an ally nor an adversary of the United States. But that was a nuanced and accurate assessment. Indeed, most nations in the international system fit that description.

Washington needs to learn — or perhaps relearn — how to operate in a world in which nations cooperate with the United States on some issues, remain neutral on others and dissent on still others. It requires diplomatic flexibility and creativity

to deal with such an environment, but with its great political and economic strengths, the United States should be able to prosper and achieve many of its objectives. To do that, however, U.S. leaders need to abandon their binary mentality, recognize that Washington will not always get its way and not throw a temper tantrum when other proud nations are unwilling to endorse the U.S. position on a particular issue.

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