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U.S. Foreign Policy after the November 2014 Elections

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Assessing the possible foreign policy consequences of America's turn toward the right requires a multi-layered approach built around four key questions:

- What happened in the November 2014 mid-term elections—and why?
- What are conservative/Republican views on foreign policy and how do they relate to the perspectives of liberals/Democrats and independents?
- How will America's political system and government institutions adjust to reflect the election outcome and shifting opinion?
- And finally, how will this affect U.S. foreign policy on specific issues?

The Mid-Term Elections

The Republican Party won a major victory in the 2014 mid-term elections, securing control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 2005-06. More concretely, the GOP gained 13 seats in the House of Representatives and 9 seats in the Senate. Of less importance to foreign policy but quite significant as a reflection of political dynamics in the United States, Republicans won a net increase of two governorships—now controlling 31 of 50—and secured full control of 30 state legislatures (and in addition to majorities in one of two houses in an additional eight states).

Nevertheless, the November 2014 elections were not foreign policy elections. Indeed, with the exception of the 2004 election (when George W. Bush was re-elected in part due to his strong response to the September 11 attacks), and the 2006 and 2008 elections (when many voters were frustrated by the ongoing war in Iraq), foreign policy has rarely had significant impact on voting behavior in the United States.

In 2014, GOP leaders owed their success to Republican anger with President Obama (which increased Republican turnout), Democratic disappointment with Obama (which reduced Democratic turnout), and the fact that a large number of Senate seats held by Democrats—in states that often lean Republican—were at stake. Beyond this, the Republican Party leadership made a concerted effort to identify and promote mainstream candidates considered less likely to alienate voters than some of the party's Senate candidates in recent election cycles. The fact that just 38% of Americans approved of Obama's job in handling foreign policy in September contributed to Republican and Democratic attitudes toward the president, but views of his policies on the economy, health care, and immigration were much more important.

With this in mind, the election does not provide a clear foreign policy mandate to Republicans in the Senate and the House of Representatives. Moreover, because the election results had a great deal to do with attitudes toward Obama, who will be leaving office after the 2016 election, and with the particular Senate seats that Republicans won, the 2014 election results do not guarantee continued Republican control of the Congress or victory by a Republican presidential candidate in 2016. At the same time, the Republican Party is increasingly divided on foreign policy and national security issues—which means that GOP control of the Congress (or a Republican president in 2016) could mean many different things.

Republican Perspectives

Analyzing Republican perspectives on foreign policy and national security requires thinking on three levels—public opinion, elite opinion, and elected officials. Each is unique in important respects.

One key issue is the degree to which Republicans (or Democrats or independents) have systematic and coherent foreign policy views rather than a collection of instinctive reactions to individual issues. Broadly speaking, those within the policy elites—columnists, pundits, experts, and some former officials—are more likely to have comprehensive foreign policy perspectives that fall within an established school of thought. Among the public and elected officials, relatively few individuals pay sustained attention to international affairs or U.S. foreign policy. This is largely a matter of time; policy elites spend far more time on these issues than the American public (who are not policy professionals) or elected officials (who often focus more on politics than policy).

Because discussing policy is their profession, the policy elites tend to dominate national debates on foreign policy issues (except in periods of crisis, when elected leaders become engaged). This in turn means that efforts to analyze U.S. foreign policy tend to focus on which elite school of thought is dominant in national debates and to interpret public opinion and statements by elected leaders as reflecting the rise or fall of a particular approach. Reality is far more complex.

Nevertheless, it may be useful to outline briefly the major schools of thought on foreign policy and national security among Republicans. Because the following descriptions are deliberately brief, they are somewhat general and oversimplified. Moreover, none of the groups is totally monolithic or exclusive.

Libertarians, also often known as non-interventionists, are skeptical toward the use of force, foreign basing of U.S. military personnel and high defense budgets. This derives from rejection of a strong national security state as a great danger to American liberty—a greater danger than many foreign threats, because of U.S. power. They often advocate against executive authority and in favor of greater congressional oversight. Former Congressman Ron Paul has been a prominent libertarian voice.

National security conservatives support a strong military and active use of U.S. military force. They tend to prefer quick and effective unilateral U.S. action to slower half-measures with broader multilateral support. Unlike neo-conservatives, they are generally reluctant to engage in nation-building. Former Under Secretary of State John Bolton is a prominent example.

Neo-conservatives also support a strong military actively employed. They define America's foreign policy goals more expansively than national security conservatives and seek to use U.S. power to promote American values internationally. Neo-conservatives tend to see conflict between democracies and non-democracies as historically inevitable. Commentator William Kristol is a leading neo-conservative.

Paleo-conservatives, like libertarians, are reluctant to become involved in international conflicts. However, they generally favor a strong American military, which paleo-conservatives see as focused narrowly on defending the United States. Paleo-conservatives often emphasize the international importance of Western civilization and its Christian foundations. Commentator and former presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan is often identified as a paleo-conservative.

Realists are selective in the use of force and generally support military action only when vital or extremely important national interests are at risk or when costs are low and the probability of success is high. They oppose nation-building and favor pragmatic approaches to achieving strategic objectives. Unlike libertarians and paleo-conservatives, however, they support active U.S. international leadership. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is a quintessential realist.

While the adherents to these five major trends within the Republican Party differed to some extent during the Cold War—for example, over *détente*, which realists supported but national security conservatives and neo-conservatives opposed—the end of the Cold War has considerably sharpened their disagreements. Many of the groups have crossed party lines to back policies advocated by Democratic presidents or have opposed policies advocated by a Republican president. (Conversely, liberal interventionist Democrats often supported President George W. Bush's policies in Iraq and Afghanistan.)

For example, neo-conservatives supported the Clinton administration's involvement in the former Yugoslavia and its humanitarian interventions, libertarians, national security conservatives, paleo-conservatives and realists opposed the moves. Likewise, only neo-conservatives supported the Bush administration's efforts to occupy and democratize Iraq, though national security conservatives and many realists supported the narrower goal of removing Saddam Hussein from power. Libertarians and paleo-conservatives largely opposed the war. Realists have generally supported the Obama administration's negotiations with Iran, which national security conservatives and neo-conservatives oppose. Neo-conservatives and national security conservatives criticized the Obama administration for doing too little in the war in Libya, while realists, libertarians and paleo-conservatives generally opposed the intervention.

Nevertheless, intellectual policy debates occurred primarily within the foreign policy elite. Among elected officials and the public, most individuals do not have a coherent and well-developed foreign policy philosophy. As a result, case-by-case by instinctive reactions and wider political context shape their attitudes on specific issues. Elite policy debates can establish the framing and the vocabulary for these political and public discussions, and can influence the agenda to some extent, but typically do not drive concrete policy decisions.

On the contrary, politics is the main driver of foreign policy discussion and, as a result, elected officials tend to engage in political debates rather than policy debates. Because they can receive considerable media attention, elected officials substantially influence which issues are under public discussion at any given time. At the same time, since television producers usually seek two clearly opposing viewpoints rather than three, four or five, members of the policy elite who appear on television often discuss foreign policy within the two-party political frame. This is especially true of experts and former officials who aspire to political appointments in the next Republican (or Democratic) administration.

National, state and local Republican Party organizations are also important in understanding Republican perspectives on foreign policy. These organizations form the transmission belt that conveys national-level policy positions and perspectives to Republican Party activists across the United States. The professionals in these organizations are primarily political operatives whose principal experience is in managing political campaigns. Volunteers—who far outnumber the professionals—are ordinary citizens who are intensely interested in America's political process. Few work professionally in international affairs or related fields.

As a practical matter, this means that state and local Republican Party organizations will generally reflect national-level GOP positions—whatever they may be at any particular time. While there may be state-by-state variation on particular issues due to political conditions, this is far more likely to affect domestic policy issues than foreign policy. Thus, for example, Republicans in relatively liberal states like California or Massachusetts often deviate from the national party on social issues. Some Republicans in the southwest have complicated national-level efforts to adjust the party's positioning on immigration. The most significant state/local influences on the politics of foreign policy are typically military bases (which produce greater support for defense spending), export industries/commodities (which produce greater support for free trade and opposition to embargos and sanctions), and large immigrant communities (which can produce greater interest in a particular country or region).

However, national-level Republican Party positions have considerably greater impact when a Republican president is in the White House. Under a Democratic president, Republicans in Congress and national party organizations face greater challenges in presenting a unified message—particularly over time. Thus, at the beginning of the Obama administration, many state and local Republicans continued to articulate Bush-era perspectives. As time passed, however, the absence of a clear centrally defined message facilitated greater debate at the state and local levels because Bush-era positions were no longer expected Republican positions on a national basis.

In addition, Republican Party organizations matter primarily to Republican activists, who are a small share of all Republicans. Activists can be very influential in some areas—such as in primary elections for presidential, Senate and House candidates—but have a limited role in shaping the views of average Americans who consider themselves Republicans or sympathize with the Republican Party.

Broadly speaking, Americans pay the most attention to foreign policy when something is going wrong—that is, when they see a threat or when they believe that the president has made a mistake. As a result, public opinion tends to evolve in response to events (as perceived threats arise) and in response to policy (when it appears to fail). Politically engaged Americans may take cues from elected officials, party organizations, or policy elites, but also form their own views.

What do Republicans think about U.S. foreign policy? Since 2006, the share of Republicans who believe that the United States should “stay out” of world affairs has grown steadily in regular polling by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, from approximately 20% in 2006 to 40% in May 2014. However, the Chicago Council’s report *Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment* (2014) makes clear that for Republicans—and Americans more broadly—“staying out” of world affairs does not mean isolationism or disengagement. Rather, the report states, it means being “more selective than average when it comes to economic assistance, military expenditures, and the use of force” while continuing to “support many forms of international engagement, including alliances, diplomacy, trade agreements, and treaties” and to being prepared to respond to “direct threats” to the United States. This greater selectivity in part reflects the fact that only 40% of Republicans (and 20% of Democrats) now say that the war in Iraq was “worth fighting.” Only 34% of Republicans say that the war in Afghanistan was worth fighting.

With respect to specific issues, according to the Chicago Council, Americans see cyber-attacks (69%), terrorism (63%), and acquisition of nuclear weapons by unfriendly countries (60%) as the critical national security threats. (Note that the survey took place before the high-profile cyber-attacks on Sony Pictures that the U.S. government attributed to North Korea.) For comparison, 38% see Russia’s territorial ambitions as a critical threat, while 24% see the civil war in Syria as critical. A Pew Research Center poll that asked Americans to identify “major threats” (a “major threat” is likely somewhat less dangerous than a “critical threat”) in August 2014 shows similar results. In the Pew survey, 80% named Islamic extremist groups like al Qaeda a major threat, with ISIL (78%) and Iran’s nuclear program (74%) close behind. Fifty-four percent described “growing tension between Russia and its neighbors” as a major threat.

Notably, in the Chicago Council’s poll, the desire to “stay out” of world affairs was most widespread among political independents (48%) and more common among Republicans (40%) than Democrats (35%). However, public opinion has continued to evolve in the months since the Chicago Council poll as Americans been disappointed with the Obama administration’s responses to the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and to Russia’s conduct in Ukraine. While the question is subtly different, polling by the Pew Research Center shows a significant increase in the share of Americans who say that the United States “does too little in helping solve world problems. Over the same period, the share of Americans believing that the United States “does too much” fell from 51% to 39%. Significantly, the percentage of Republicans agreeing with the statement that the United States does too little more than doubled over this period—from 18% to 46%. To be clear what “doing too little” means, 77% of Republicans (and 54% of all Americans) said that President Obama is “not tough

enough in his approach to foreign policy and national security issues.” Significantly, in the August 2014 Pew survey 57% of Republicans supported sending ground troops to Iraq and Syria to fight ISIL—a sharp increase from earlier polling.

What remains unclear is whether the recent hardening in Republican foreign policy attitudes will endure or, conversely, whether it may subside if attacks on ISIL appear to be succeeding, slow progress continues in talks with Iran, and the conflict in Ukraine remains relatively quiet. Because public opinion is reactive, it will continue to evolve as events unfold and Americans evaluate their government’s policy responses. For the time being, however, Republicans (and Americans) appear divided on how active Washington should be—particularly in its use of military force.

Perspectives and Policy

The third key issue in understanding how the Republican successes in the November 2014 elections and broader trends in American society will affect U.S. foreign policy is an analysis of America’s policy process. Specifically, what impact can Republican control of the Congress and Republican perspectives within policy elites and the American public have on specific policy decisions?

First, it is necessary to recognize that even a weak president facing a hostile Congress has considerable authority to make foreign policy. As the nation’s chief executive, the president controls government agencies that implement foreign policy and, as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, the president can order the use of military force—though it can be more difficult to sustain costly operations. Though Congress appropriates the money that allows the executive branch to act, exercising this control takes time and creates a variety of political complications. In the short-term, the executive branch has broad discretion.

Second, divisions among Republicans on important foreign policy and national security issues—especially the use of force and defense spending—will give President Obama more flexibility in making policy. These divisions can also produce unexpected results in the Congress; for example, few observers expected the budget sequestration provisions in the 2011 Budget Control Act to take effect because most expected that Congressional Republicans would be unwilling to accept indiscriminate cuts in the defense budget and, as a result, saw good chances for a compromise deal during negotiations among the “Super-Committee” established under the law. This analysis was incorrect because many newly elected fiscal conservatives preferred the defense cuts (along with cuts in social programs) to a “bad” deal with Congressional Democrats.

At the same time, America will focus increasingly on its 2016 presidential election during coming a year and a half. In this environment, Republican leaders in the Senate and the House of Representatives will be seeking opportunities to contrast their priorities and positions with those of the Obama administration. Because many see the president as insufficiently tough, Republicans will be particularly tempted to appear tough themselves. Since the American public is skeptical of deeper military involvement in Iraq and Syria, this may mean “tougher” positions on Russia, Iran and North

Korea. If nothing unexpected happens, Republican divisions on Cuba will probably prevent the Congress from acting there. At the same time, Republicans will want to demonstrate that they are prepared to govern and therefore that they are able to work with Democrats on some foreign policy issues—especially trade, where the two parties have a shared interest in steps that could stimulate continued economic growth and create jobs.

In view of the divisions among Republicans, from a foreign policy perspective some of the most important questions moving forward will relate to the 2016 election. Who is the Republican 2016 presidential nominee? What foreign policy outlook will that individual bring to the campaign (and to a possible term in office)? And will Congressional Republicans, Republican policy elites and Republican-leaning voters eventually unify behind the party's candidate?

It is far too early to attempt to predict the identity of the nominee. However, it has already become clear that few of the leading candidates have significant foreign policy experience. Many are governors—such as New Jersey's Chris Christie, Florida's Jeb Bush, and Wisconsin's Scott Walker—who by definition have focused overwhelmingly on the affairs of their individual states and have limited foreign policy experience. (According to recent news reports, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney may also run again; he has somewhat more international experience due to his business career.) Two of the candidates with the most experience—Senator Marco Rubio and Senator Rand Paul—have served in the Senate for only four years, though each has served on relevant committees (Rubio on Foreign Relations and Intelligence, Paul on Homeland Security and Foreign Relations). Rubio and Paul also have the most clearly-defined foreign policy perspectives, with Rubio generally reflecting neo-conservative attitudes and Paul identifying himself repeatedly as a foreign policy realist (and distancing himself from some but not all of his father former Congressman Ron Paul's libertarian positions).

Although the Bush administration's foreign policy philosophy—a combination of neo-conservative and national security conservative approaches with some realist elements—remains dominant within the GOP, realist-libertarian skepticism toward frequent military interventions has clearly grown. In this environment, and when President Obama is seen as too weak in foreign policy, a candidate with this general direction will likely have an easier time unifying the party than a more overtly realist-oriented candidate. In fact, some suggest that neo-conservatives would support former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton over Rand Paul on foreign policy grounds.

Nevertheless, as history has shown, a candidate's campaign positions on foreign policy and national security matters are not powerful predictors of foreign policy decisions. For example, candidate George W. Bush famously called for a more "humble" foreign policy and opposed nation-building, while candidate Barack Obama's opposition to the Iraq war did not prevent him from deciding to intervene in Libya. (Obama also of course pledged to close the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, but has not done so.) As a result, it is quite difficult to foresee how a hypothetical Republican president might go about making foreign policy in 2017, except in the most general terms.

The Policy Process

Broadly speaking, Congressional Republicans have three tools at their disposal: hearings and investigations, non-binding resolutions, and binding legislation. Of course, the power to pass legislation includes control over budget appropriations. Senate Republicans can also delay or obstruct appointments of senior officials and diplomats and—if President Obama should sign any formal international treaties rather than executive agreements—ratify or block treaties.

From a political perspective, hearings are well suited to demonstrating quick action to respond to public concerns, obvious policy failures, or potential wrongdoing. Hearings apply political pressure but do not produce specific policy outcomes. Investigations obviously require much more time, but can be useful in ensuring sustained attention to a particular topic. However, investigations can be politically damaging if they do not produce credible outcomes suggesting wrongdoing.

The Republican Congress could also pass non-binding resolutions quickly for symbolic reasons. As a practical matter, however, these resolutions usually receive minimal media and public attention and—especially when passed on a party-line vote—are often quickly dismissed. Still resolutions can be useful in attracting attention to an issue without requiring any particular action—something important when Republicans are divided or, alternatively, when they do not have a concrete policy proposal.

If Republicans elect to pass legislation on foreign policy, President Obama of course retains veto power. Overturning a presidential veto would require significant support from Democrats—in which case Mr. Obama would have bigger political problems than he does not appear to have now. Nevertheless, an opposing party controlling the Congress may attempt to force a veto to clarify the president's position for its own political benefit.

The federal budget may well become such an issue, in that Republicans have complained for some time about the Democratic Senate's delays in passing budgets. Under the circumstances, Republicans may seek to demonstrate both that they can pass a budget on time and that it will reflect their political priorities. Whether or not the White House objects to the defense and foreign policy components of a Republican budget, the president may veto such a budget on domestic political grounds, complicating State Department and Pentagon operations.

Policy elites generally have limited impact on specific actions by Congress, or by the executive branch, for several reasons. First, they are obviously not directly involved in the decision-making process and therefore clearly lack any formal role. Second, because they are not directly involved, policy elites as a whole tend to lack sufficient up-to-date information to formulate concrete and detailed policy proposals. Third, legislators and executive branch officials seek to avoid the impression that outside individuals or groups shape policy decisions. Finally, the unpredictable pace of decision-making can make it difficult for anyone not directly involved in the process to contribute.

Nevertheless, elites can have a significant role in the overall policy process by shaping the agenda and framing debate. This does not produce specific outcomes but can support or discourage broad approaches—making it easier or more difficult for the administration or the Congress to pursue a particular direction.

Policy elites exercise influence in one way by adding or removing issues from the day-to-day policy agenda through the attention and priority they receive. For example, the policy and media elites put pressure on the administration to take action against ISIL by dedicating substantial attention to its brutal killing of two Americans. Elites applied similar pressure over the spread of Ebola—especially after cases appeared in the United States. Elites often also encourage humanitarian assistance and defense of human rights.

Once a particular issue is on the agenda, policy elites influence decision-making through framing—that is, by discussing the issue in ways that make specific approaches more or less likely. For example, while the Bush administration put the invasion of Iraq onto the agenda, policy elites made it more likely by underestimating its costs. Likewise, Russia put Ukraine’s territorial integrity onto the agenda, but elite attitudes towards Russia’s government and perceived objectives generated framing that encouraged a harsh American response (while also minimizing perceived risks to the United States from such an approach). Conversely, divisions within the policy elite over Syria’s civil war reduced pressure on the Obama administration and provided the White House with greater flexibility until chemical weapons attacks and the later rise of ISIL in Iraq each affected how elites framed the conflict, leading to greater pressure on the president to act.

Where Republican policy elites are divided—again, particularly over defense spending and the use of force—they will contribute to divisions within the wider elites. As described above, this can increase the president’s room for maneuver on related issues.

Public opinion shapes policy in much the same manner as elite opinion. However, where those in the elites express their perspectives in 800-word opinion articles or 15-second television clips, public opinion manifests itself in fractions of sentences drawn from opinion surveys. Thus, public opinion is even less able to produce specific policies and serves primarily as a broad guide or general sense of direction. Because Republican public opinion is divided—like Republican elite opinion—it is less useful in predicting the political pressures that the administration will face during coming a year and a half.

Implications for U.S. Policy

The most significant near-term policy consequences after America’s November 2014 elections and the broader rightward trends it exposed will derive from Republican control of both houses of the U.S. Congress and Republican leaders’ sense that President Obama is politically vulnerable on foreign policy.

Republicans in Congress can demonstrate their “toughness” in several ways. One is to get tough on the administration—organizing hearings and investigations of the administration’s policy decisions to generate political pressure. Recent hearings and reports on the death of four U.S. diplomats in Benghazi, Libya are an example of this. The administration’s “rebalancing” policy in East Asia could be one target for hearings as a way to position Republicans as stronger on security issues without requiring an increase in the defense budget, which would divide Republicans, or any specific steps to confront China. Americans are worried about China—47% see U.S. debt to China as a “critical” issue and 41% see China’s development as a world power as “critical.” However, absent any immediate crisis, China has not been a top policy priority. With help from sympathetic Republican policy elites, Congressional Republicans could try to exploit existing public concerns about China to their political advantage.

On Iran, many Congressional Republicans will likely continue to criticize the administration’s willingness to negotiate with Iran and to outline key conditions they expect in any deal. However, there are significant divisions over how best to proceed. Many Republicans support draft legislation from Senators Mark Kirk (R-IL) and Robert Menendez (D-NJ) that would automatically impose new sanctions if there is no agreement with Iran by June 30. Others—including Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker and Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain—back a milder approach intended to force Mr. Obama to send any eventual deal to the Congress for approval. Sentiment is growing in the Congress that the legislative branch needs to reassert its oversight role on foreign policy matters, and this latter approach may win bipartisan support. If the Congress forces the president to seek its approval, America’s domestic politics could make it quite difficult to reach a lasting agreement.

With respect to Russia, Republicans appear unlikely to pass new legislation without a new crisis on the ground in Ukraine. They are more likely to pursue hearings—perhaps continuing an existing line of pressure related to Russia’s alleged violation of arms control commitments and the administration’s relatively weak response. If the administration attempts to reduce tensions with Moscow, which appears to be its current goal, it is likely to encounter resistance from Republicans unwilling to reduce or remove sanctions imposed by Congress (as distinct from those introduced by executive order).

In the Middle East, Republicans remain divided over key issues, including whether or not the United States should expand its attacks on ISIL, possibly including ground troops, and whether or not to provide significant military assistance to Syria’s rebels combating the Assad government. As a result, the administration is more likely to face sharp public criticism from individual Republicans—particularly some prominent members of the U.S. Senate—than any concrete action. However, taking into account, Senator John McCain’s new role as Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, administration officials may also confront greater pressure to defend their approach to these issues and to explain what they have done.

The administration’s recent opening to Cuba has divided Republicans, leading to a public disagreement between Senator Rand Paul (who supported the White House) and Senator Marco Rubio (who has a Cuban family background) on social media. Arizona Senator Jeff Flake has also supported President Obama. However, while the administration may have enough support to avoid hostile legislation, it likely does not have enough to pass legislation to remove sanctions—especially

because the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's top Democrat, New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez (who also has a Cuban family background), is deeply skeptical of engaging with Havana.

More broadly, the administration's policies toward Cuba, Iran and Russia could force a major debate on the U.S. use of economic sanctions during 2015 and 2016. In all three cases, the United States may have to choose between continuing economic sanctions at the expense of other steps to improve these three complex relationships to advance U.S. national interests. At this point, Republicans in Congress, Republican policy elites and Republicans in general tend to favor economic sanctions—as do most Americans—as a useful alternative to military action. However, as ties to Cuba, Iran and Russia evolve, ongoing sanctions may force closer examination and deeper discussion of sanctions and their effectiveness in achieving U.S. goals.

It is of course impossible to separate Republican perspectives and politics from America's wider society in a debate like this or, indeed, in discussions of any major issue. In these cases, broad elite and public opinion, and potential bipartisan coalitions involving factions sympathetic to each party as well as independent voters, may be more significant than Republican views alone. From this point-of-view, the real competition over U.S. foreign policy might be between a neo-conservative/liberal-interventionist coalition more supportive of assertive use of force (and defense spending to sustain it) and a realist/libertarian/liberal internationalist/liberal coalition more skeptical of the use of force (Democratic liberal internationalists generally prefer multilateral diplomacy over force and usually want UN Security Council authorization for military action; liberals oppose most if not all military action). National security conservatives would likely support the more assertive group in using force—but not in nation-building—while paleo-conservatives could support the more assertive group on the defense budget (but not on interventions).

Finally, it is useful to remember that one side or the other rarely “wins” any truly important political debate. Such cases do exist, but they have required long and slow processes of consensus-building rather than success in elections or a particular vote in Congress (in fact, the important votes usually come at the end of this process). With this in mind, shifting approaches to issues like defense spending, the use of force, or economic sanctions are often largely reactions to perceived mistakes that will continue only so long as there are no new errors. Then the pendulum will swing in the other direction, whatever it may be.

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