

Syria has exposed the fault lines in the Republican Party over foreign policy

While the Republican Party is largely united against President Obama's domestic policies, recent moves in Washington to intervene militarily in Syria have exposed the lack of consensus in the party on foreign policy issues. [Sam Hazelgrove](#) argues that the GOP's past opposition to Obama has masked the division of the party on foreign policy into hawkish hardliners and neo-isolationists. Given Republicans' historic tendency to support interventions of this sort, it remains to be seen if this isolationist view will endure.

"On Saturday," Paul Krugman writes in his latest [New York Times article](#), "Senator John Barrasso of Wyoming delivered the weekly [Republican Address](#). He ignored Syria... Instead he demanded the repeal of the Affordable Care Act." "Who cares?" asks Krugman.

Krugman's question is a valid one. The hatred of Obama and his legislative agenda that has united the Republican Party for the past six years is hiding a deeper existential crisis. The party lacks identity, and it lacks character. Focusing its energy on opposing the Obama Administration has drained the GOP of its intellectual capacity. It has been unable to reflect on and to answer some essential philosophical questions such the party's position on economic, social or foreign policy. Consequently the party has lacked the focus necessary to produce convincing leadership that is capable of creating a political consensus.

The opposition to President Obama has quite successfully masked some of the deeper issues facing

Senator John Barrasso Credit: Gage Skidmore (Creative Commons BY SA)

Republicans in the domestic sphere, particularly on healthcare, gun rights and immigration. However, when it comes to foreign policy, simply opposing Obama hasn't been enough. It would seem this tactic has proved effective for Republicans in both the House of Representatives and those seeking gubernatorial candidacies, but useless when it comes to running for the White House. The GOP, traditionally strong on matters of international affairs, is struggling with some fundamental questions regarding the United States role in the world, and particularly the use of US power overseas.

John Bolton, the former US Ambassador to the UN, believes the answer lies in the Party formulating a "Reaganite foreign policy." In a [Chatham House article](#), the former Ambassador argues that, "Obama's failure to exert power has left the US vulnerable."

Mitt Romney's attempt to revive this John Wayne style of foreign policy ended miserably during his 2012 Presidential campaign when he claimed that Russia was a geopolitical foe. When he came to debate foreign policy with the President in October, and he was pressed to define the Republican narrative on international affairs, it turned out there [was no substantial difference between his and the President's positions on most issues](#). Furthermore, Mitt Romney expressed no desire to articulate an agenda based on the neoconservative principles of democratic universalism or unilateralism that had inspired the likes of Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Lewis Libby, Paul Wolfowitz and two generations of conservative Americans.

Republicans are still grappling with this fundamental problem. Since the last presidential election there have been a few opportunities for Republicans to discuss foreign policy amongst themselves and it appears a split, not just in rhetoric but also in policy, has developed between the party's traditional hardliners and emerging libertarians, or "neo-isolationists."

The recent leaking of NSA documents by Edward Snowden illustrates the kind of debate occurring between the party's foreign policy factions. In July the [FT](#) reported that the Pentagon Spending Bill (HR. 2397) was being delayed by a number of Republicans who had concerns about the Government's electronic

surveillance programmes. According to [media reports](#) the House of Representatives narrowly rejected (205-217) an amendment to the Bill that would limit the National Security Agency from collecting phone calls unless agreed to by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court.

Justin Amash, the Michigan Congressman responsible for laying the amendment, [tweeted](#) that the Bill would otherwise be a “vote to fund continued NSA spying on you and your family.” However, according to [Bloomberg](#), Republican House Intelligence Committee (HIC) Chairman Mike Rogers said that the amendment would have “eliminated a crucial counterterrorism tool.” Notwithstanding, the GOP’s existential foreign policy crisis extends far beyond the House floor to more immediate global concerns.

The Syria question has also split the Republican Party. Early this month, when President Obama stood in front of the White House and made the case for taking action against the Assad regime and its stockpile of chemical weapons, he received support from Senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham. The press conference gave the already sceptical American public the impression that any attack on the Assad regime would be the result of bipartisan negotiations.

Yet leading members of the GOP have voiced opposition to any type of military intervention in Syria, suggesting the Party does not have a coherent conception of how and when to use American power abroad. The debate has been animated by the remarks of Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, who said, “I would ask John Kerry, how can you ask a man to be the first one to die for a mistake.” The [New York Times](#) reported recently on negative exchanges between Senator McCain and Senator Paul.

The Republicans, sceptical of intervention, appear to be reflecting the lack of public enthusiasm for US action. According to [Gallup](#), only 24 per cent of Americans approve of the US military intervening in Syria. When the numbers are broken down into party subgroups, only 31 per cent of Republicans asked believed military intervention was a viable option.

President Obama has called a Congressional vote to approve military strikes against the Assad regime to prevent it from using chemical weapons. The vote will give greater insight into the Republican split on the Syria question. It will be a vote that is likely to dominate foreign policy discussions within the party up until the next presidential election.

This relatively new, and apparently persuasive, Republican isolationism is an unusual occurrence. For example, when the Cold War came to an end neither the Democratic or Republican Party questioned seriously America’s continued involvement in world politics. It will be fascinating to see whether this neo-isolationist faction represents a long-term trend in Republican thinking.

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