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*Republicans on U.S. Foreign Policy:  
Romney's Reluctant Embrace of Neoconservatism*

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If positions taken by a presidential candidate during the campaign are any indications of the kind of policies that would be implemented in case of electoral success, then Republican Mitt Romney's foreign and security policy agenda could be labeled as neoconservative. On the campaign trail, Romney has repeatedly invoked or alluded to concepts associated with this strand of Republican thinking about the United States' role in the world, including so-called moral clarity as a key foreign policy driver, unrivalled military capabilities, seeking and ensuring maximum freedom to manoeuvre for a transformative (if not revolutionary) global strategy without displaying too much deference to multilateralism, standing up to (as opposed to seeking accommodation with) America's rivals, and preempting growing threats to national security to prevent them from becoming full-blown crises.

Numerous accounts of Romney's circle of advisers on international affairs have focused on the prominence of neoconservative experts and intellectuals in the candidate's milieu, as well as on the first-tier roles that the Romney campaign assigned to a number of former high-ranking officials in the George W. Bush administration. These advisors are associated with executing Bush's landmark initiatives, such as the war in Iraq and plans for missile defence. Romney also counts on advice from John Bolton, the former American ambassador to the UN, Dan Senor, who served in a senior position for the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq immediately after the conflict broke out in 2003, Eric Edelman, a high-ranking Pentagon official during Bush's second term, and Eliot Cohen, who advised Condoleezza Rice during her time at the State Department and co-founded the neoconservative think tank Project for a New American Century (PNAC) back in the mid-1990s. In late 2008, PNAC was succeeded by the Foreign Policy Institute (FPI), where Edelman, as well as Robert Kagan and William Kristol—two leading neoconservative intellectuals, and fellow PNAC founders—play leading roles. Of course, the institutional (and intellectual) basis for the Romney campaign was broader. For example, his position on the size of the defence budget (in essence, pegging it to 4% of GDP, excluding expenditures associated with ongoing military operations) was backed by a coalition of three think-tanks (Defending Defense Coalition) associated with the neoconservative tradition—FPI, the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation. What is more, neoconservatives could be found in the campaign staffs of a number of other contenders for the Republican nomination.<sup>1</sup>

However, as is often the case with labels, it would be inaccurate to omit important nuances that marked Romney's positions on specific foreign policy issues (and in effect blunted the neoconservative edge of his agenda), and thus to ignore a broader debate within the Republican Party (or the GOP) on the course of American global strategy. Apart from neoconservatives, this debate involves those with a conservative (or realist, moderate) approach to U.S. foreign policy-making, and a not-so-marginal isolationist camp. As this paper will argue, Romney's ultimate affinity to the neoconservative worldview should not be seen as surprising, free of caveats, or decisive in terms of charting future U.S. foreign policy—but rather as reluctant at best.

<sup>1</sup> P. Rucker, "Mitt Romney Taps Foreign Policy, National Security Advisers," *Washington Post*, 6 October 2011; A. Stone, "GOP Foreign Policy: Neoconservatives Looking for a Comeback in 2012," *Huffington Post*, 28 November 2011, [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com); A. Berman, "Mitt Romney's Neocon War Cabinet," *The Nation*, 2 May 2012, [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com).

The Republican primaries were a sound testimony to the vividness of the intra-party divide on foreign policy, and therefore merit attention as a springboard for a more detailed exegesis of Romney's positions. Moreover, this divide on the American right was clearly visible during the direct stand-off between Romney and Barack Obama, even though one could reasonably have expected that the emphasis would be put on unity and coherence of views, or at least on muting the voices that dissented from the message of the GOP candidate. This in turn suggested that, if Romney were to win the election, his administration's foreign and security policy would be influenced by a mixture of ideas, and run by representatives of various traditions of Republican foreign policy making. Similarly, even if Romney's presidential bid proved unsuccessful, these same traditions would be likely to animate the foreign policy positions of future generations of Republican leaders.

### **The (Imperfect) Republican Foreign Policy Tripod**

Of course, the traditions in question ought to be treated as unicorn-like ideal constructs.<sup>2</sup> Decision makers rarely (if ever) commit themselves to specific ideologies, either knowingly or inadvertently. Rather, as borne out by historical examples, American foreign policy has, when shaped by Republican administrations, often depended on combinations of recipes from at least two sets of views. In addition, and quite interestingly, their proponents sometimes found themselves at odds over specific decisions or policies; for example, some in the conservative camp were highly critical of the neoconservative case for the war in Iraq in 2003. Isolationists in the Republican Party question the merits of America's close relationship with Israel, including (but not limited to) vast financial support for the Jewish state. They advocate trimming of defence spending—a position that runs counter to both conservative and (even more so) neoconservative agendas. If these traditions are nonetheless useful as tools for analysing the Republican approach to shaping U.S. grand strategy, it is because they help to map the discourse over actual, real-life policy.

The conservative tradition had given way to such foreign policy initiatives as the *détente* with the Soviet Union and opening up to communist China under Richard Nixon. It also played a prominent role in the thinking of the George W. Bush administration prior to 9/11. It is a vision that entails a humble (even uninspiring) foreign policy, shuns an overly moralistic tone, is bent on seeking accommodation rather than competition in international affairs, and values status quo over change because of embedded skepticism vis-à-vis America's ability to shape world politics as it sees fit. Conservatism's embrace of unilateralism as a foreign policy tactic is purely pragmatic, and has little to do with the notion of American exceptionalism—rather, given the need to adapt in a timely fashion to circumstances beyond its control, the United States must retain freedom to manoeuvre.

As has already been mentioned, neoconservatism relies heavily on the conviction of America's moral edge in international affairs, and the belief in the superiority of U.S. values and institutions over those of other nations and states. Foreign policy should therefore have an important transformative dimension, which takes the form of neoconservatives' embrace of democracy promotion. In fact, the spread of democracy is considered to be both a matter of America's self-assigned mission for the betterment of the world, and a strategy for making the United States more secure. Hence the goal of spreading democracy can be expected to weigh heavily on the decisions to employ military force, as was the case with the neoconservative justifications for the intervention in Iraq in 2003. Neoconservatism demands that the United States have the right to act unilaterally, and does so both for ideological and security reasons. America's fate is to be an empire, to sustain its hegemonic status (the notion of a "unipolar moment," a term coined by a leading neoconservative intellectual, Charles Krauthammer, in the dying days of the Cold War), and to prevent the (re)emergence of a geopolitical rival, able to challenge the United States and the premises of the international order that the U.S. power underpins.

Isolationism is predicated on the fear that an overly activist foreign policy will result in the growth of the influence (and size!) of the executive branch of the federal government, and that an oversized bureaucracy, together with a large national security apparatus, will pose a threat to American democratic institutions during peace time. Relative inattention to the developments in the wider world mean that Republican administrations (or a Republican-controlled Congress) influenced by an isolationist worldview might be fairly slow in acknowledging the emergence of a serious threat to U.S. security—unlike neoconservatives, who would rather tend to exaggerate external challenges.

<sup>2</sup> The classification is based on: B. Rathbun, "Does One Right Make a Realist? Conservatism, Neoconservatism, and Isolationism in the Foreign Policy Ideology of American Elites," *Political Science Quarterly*, no. 2, 2008, pp. 271–299.

However, this is not to say that an isolationism-driven administration would ignore a major international crisis. In fact, the opposite would be likely to be true, especially if the crisis were to have a negative impact on America's core security or economic interests. The desire to return to the minimal "exposure" to world politics quickly could in fact prompt a decisive, forceful reaction to the external crisis.

Neoconservative ideas made it into the mainstream worldview of the GOP establishment in the light of 9/11, and continue to animate it despite the obvious unpopularity of such landmark neoconservative-endorsed initiatives as the Iraq war, and the associated controversies over the issue of democracy promotion as part of the U.S. grand strategy. Neoconservatism's enduring appeal was visible during the 2008 presidential campaign, when John McCain's agenda included the idea of creating the League of Democracies—a group of like minded (democratic) states that would be ready to act whenever the UN Security Council was deadlocked in a controversy over a serious international crisis. After the election, neoconservative intellectuals continued active scrutiny of the Obama administration's foreign policy, from their positions in academia and the think-tank industry.<sup>3</sup> Their ability to remain the leading GOP voice on international affairs resulted both from their organisational and financial upper hand, and generational factors. The Republican heavyweights who subscribe (and have often contributed) to the conservative tradition, such as Henry Kissinger, James Baker and Brent Scowcroft, while still revered, are slowly withdrawing from the public life. In fact, Scowcroft turned out to be one of the most listened-to advisers to... Barack Obama.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Colin Powell, who served in the Reagan administration and as the secretary of state under George W. Bush in his first term, endorsed Obama in 2008. Powell's gesture, as well as Robert Gates' decision to stay at the helm of the Pentagon beyond 2008, could suggest a sense of political alienation among the more moderate, conservative-minded Republicans within their own ranks. That is precisely why a joint op-ed by four former secretaries of state in Republican administrations, praising Romney's "strong and mature vision of American leadership" and explicitly endorsing his candidacy, conveyed a very powerful message of the whole GOP establishment—both old and new—lining up behind the GOP's candidate.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, some former prominent G.W. Bush-era officials and neoconservative pundits, such as Elliott Abrams, asserted openly that "the intellectual energy is on the neoconservative side," and that there is hardly "anyone below the age of 40 who is pushing [conservative] ideas."<sup>6</sup>

Still, while neoconservatism's grasp on GOP foreign policy thinking is these days stronger than that of either conservatism or isolationism, thus turning the Republican foreign policy tripod into a rather jolty structure, it is by no means absolute or unquestioned, as borne out, for example, by the limited appeal of democracy promotion among the Republican electorate,<sup>7</sup> and even more so by the tone of the foreign policy debate in the run-up to the 2012 presidential election.

### The Republican Primaries and Foreign Policy

With the powerful exception of Ron Paul, the iconic libertarian Congressman from Texas, and, to a lesser extent, Jon Huntsman—former U.S. ambassador to China and Singapore, and former governor of Utah—virtually no candidate in the Republican pack ran on a foreign policy platform that bore even the slightest signs of isolationist thinking. In fact, it was precisely the foreign policy agenda that was considered the biggest obstacle to Paul's bid for the Republican nomination. As for Huntsman, he was arguably the only candidate with strong international credentials, but lacked both Paul's appeal on economic and social issues and a devoted group of supporters—something that has allowed the latter candidate to perform fairly well in the primaries. At the GOP National Convention in August 2012, Paul received more than 8% of all delegate votes, despite having effectively suspended his campaign in May. Huntsman dropped out as early as January.

On foreign policy, the GOP primaries were thus all about the degree of neoconservative and conservative influences on each candidates' positions—all in all, a decisively internationalist outlook, with few indications of a desire to scale down America's global commitments, e.g. via cuts in defence

<sup>3</sup> G. Carey, "In From the Cold," *The American Conservative*, March 2010, pp. 37–38.

<sup>4</sup> J. Mann, *The Obamians*, Penguin, New York, 2012, pp. 156–170.

<sup>5</sup> C. Rice, J. Baker, G. Schultz, H. Kissinger, "Romney for Recovery," *Washington Times*, 5 September 2012, [www.washingtontimes.com](http://www.washingtontimes.com).

<sup>6</sup> J. Kitfield, "Mitt Romney's Neocon Puzzle," *The National Interest*, 22 August 2012, [www.nationalinterest.org](http://www.nationalinterest.org).

<sup>7</sup> According to the 2012 Chicago Council on Global Affairs Survey on American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy, only 11% of Republicans (as opposed to 21% of Democrats) believed that "helping to bring a democratic form of government to other nations" was a "very important foreign policy goal of the United States," see p. 43 of the Survey, at [www.chicagocouncil.org](http://www.chicagocouncil.org).

spending.<sup>8</sup> Arguably the best illustration of the tension between the neoconservative and the conservative instincts was provided by the approach to the Arab Spring, including the political fate of one of America's closest allies in the Middle East, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak. Some candidates, such as Michele Bachmann and Rick Santorum, warned against Mubarak's ouster, viewing it as a prelude to a power-grab by Islamist circles. Romney and Newt Gingrich adopted a rather balanced stance, calling on Mubarak to give up power, in effect falling in line with the policy of the Obama administration. Tim Pawlenty, who pulled out of the Republican race even before the first primaries and threw his support behind Romney, came forward with a far more hawkish position. He demanded that the United States' actions be guided by "moral clarity," and interpreted the revolutionary wave in the Arab world as a pro-democracy movement whose ideals were closely linked to American values.<sup>9</sup> In sum, the neoconservative inclination to seek and promote greater democratisation enjoyed at best only partial support among those seeking the Republican nomination.

Republicans were divided over the intervention in Libya, too. Differences of opinion about whether the United States should have taken part in the operation pointed to the pertinence of all three schools of GOP foreign policy thinking. As in the case of Egypt, Bachmann took a conservative approach, arguing that Qaddafi's rule meant greater stability and thus opposed aiding the rebels. Rick Perry spoke against the use of military power in a situation in which vital American interests were not at stake. Since he qualified the Libya case as an example of a humanitarian intervention, that put him in the conservative camp, which is not to say that his positions were not contradictory. Perry's restrained stance vis-à-vis the Libya operation was not reflected in his declaration that the United States should be ready to eliminate threats before they took shape. Gingrich changed his views on the war in Libya. He favoured introducing a no-fly zone, only to later criticise U.S. involvement in enforcing it.<sup>10</sup> Santorum opposed aiding the Libyan rebels, but demanded that the Obama administration act more decisively against the Assad regime in Syria. Perry endorsed a no-fly zone in Syria as early as October 2011, thus far outpacing Romney in his criticism of official United States' policy. Unsurprisingly, both Paul and Huntsman condemned U.S. involvement in Libya, and qualified the operation as yet another war of choice, akin to Iraq and, to an increasing extent, Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>

Criticism of both wars was quite widespread within the GOP establishment. A considerable group of Republican members of Congress, many of them owing their electoral success to the backing of the Tea Party, greeted the announcement of the end of the U.S. military presence in Iraq in late 2011 with applause, echoing the growing war fatigue and diminished readiness to back an interventionist foreign policy on the side of traditional GOP supporters.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, some very prominent Republican leaders associated with the neoconservative school criticised the Obama administration for failing to extend the mission in Iraq, especially in the light of the deterioration of security situation there. In the case of Afghanistan, the candidates displayed growing unease when requested to present a coherent position and to communicate it to the war-weary American public. For example, early on (after coming back from Afghanistan in the summer of 2011), Romney made the surprising declaration that America should not get involved in "wars of independence for other countries," thus hinting at an expedited end to the war, and veering towards Huntsman's position. At the same time, he criticised the administration's war strategy, especially in setting the timeline for the withdrawal of troops. In late 2011, Romney declared that he would make decisions about the U.S. military strategy in Afghanistan only after having consulted the commanders in the field.<sup>13</sup>

In doing so, Romney was, interestingly enough, actually running the risk of alienating voters. In March, after further deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan, 53% of Americans favoured an earlier pullout, even before the coalition forces would be able to carry out the task of training the Afghan security forces and placing responsibility for maintaining security in Afghan hands.<sup>14</sup> Moreover,

<sup>8</sup> J. Lindsay, *Are Republicans Turning Isolationist?*, Council on Foreign Relations, 24 October 2011, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

<sup>9</sup> See: *Campaign 2012 Series: A Conversation with Tim Pawlenty*, Council on Foreign Relations, 29 June 2011, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

<sup>10</sup> J. Traub, "The Elephants in the Room," *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.

<sup>11</sup> E. Lake, "All Over the Map," *The New Republic*, 18 August 2011; R. Grim, "Jon Huntsman on Afghanistan: I Want to Get Out Fast," *Huffington Post*, 9 January 2012, [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com).

<sup>12</sup> R. Berman, "Withdrawal Plan in Iraq splits GOP," *The Hill*, 25 October 2011.

<sup>13</sup> E. Lake, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> "Washington Post—ABC News Poll," March 10 2012, [www.washingtonpost.com/politics/polling](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/polling). Original wording of the question: "Do you think the United States should keep its military forces in Afghanistan until it has trained the Afghan army to be self-sufficient; OR, do you think the United States should withdraw its military forces even if the Afghan army is not adequately trained?"

in early April, a majority of Republican-leaning voters spoke out against continuing the mission—for the first time since it began in late 2001.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps crucially, these tensions continued to persist even after the primaries, proving that the differences between the candidates reflected actual divisions within the GOP electorate, and were not merely highlighted for the purposes of political positioning. Indeed, the debate over the Republican policy platform in the run-up to the party convention in late August revealed serious friction over issues such as nation-building, defence spending, foreign aid, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, even after Romney had accepted the Republican nomination, the debate between the internationalist (neoconservative and conservative) and isolationist narratives did not cease. Romney faced continued criticism of his (allegedly) profligate approach to defence spending, an imprudent, i.e. overly aggressive, position towards the crisis in Syria, and an overly bellicose stance towards Iran. As one leading isolationist-minded GOP senator argued less than a month before the general election, America's problem in North Africa and the Middle East was not a "lack of intervention," but rather that the United States intervened in "too many places, too often," and that this activist policy has "created more enemies than it has vanquished."<sup>17</sup>

### Romney on Foreign Policy—Neoconservatism on a Leash

Romney's advisers decided to deliberately downplay foreign and security policy as a campaign issue, arguing that his message should focus on voters' concerns about the economic outlook and thus challenge the incumbent president on the meagre recovery, persistent high unemployment, and ballooning public debt. This strategy was hardly surprising. When the GOP was entering the primary season, Obama fared poorly regarding his handling of the economy (with 59% disapproving, and 38% approving his performance in this area), but his national security policy was approved by a majority of Americans (53%), and when asked specifically about dealing with the terrorist threat, the approval rate was even higher (65%).<sup>18</sup> In addition, Romney's choice of the vice-presidential candidate was dictated squarely by the desire to beef up his campaign's domestic vision, especially with respect to credibility among the fiscally-oriented GOP base. Paul Ryan could not boast any significant international credentials, hence some commentators seemed to question whether the presidential ticket with the least foreign policy experience in the whole of the post-Second World War history of American politics would rise to the challenge of restoring the Republican Party's credibility in this domain, which had been badly damaged during the presidency of George W. Bush.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, it was not until September, and the outburst of anti-American violence in North Africa and the Middle East, that the Romney team came forward with a more aggressive strategy of scrutinising the Obama administration for its foreign policy and—given the heightened awareness of the terrorist threat following the attack on a U.S. consulate in Libya—questioning the efficacy of the administration's counter-terrorism policies.<sup>20</sup> Even then, however, Romney was being criticised from within Republican-leaning expert circles for paying inadequate attention to spelling out his vision of America's role in the world.<sup>21</sup> Worse still, while he managed to instill into voters some doubts about the soundness of Obama's leadership on foreign and security issues, he did not close the gap entirely. Just two weeks before the elections, public opinion polls still pointed to Obama's edge over Romney.

In fact, Romney came forward with a blueprint of his understanding of U.S. foreign policy quite early, if only to signal the seriousness of his candidacy. In October 2011, his campaign published a white book entitled *An American Century: A Strategy to Secure America's Enduring Interests and Ideals*.<sup>22</sup> The document is vintage neoconservative thinking. It declares that "it is only American

<sup>15</sup> D. Balz, "Afghan Killings Bring War to Republican Presidential Campaign Trail," *Washington Post*, 13 March 2012; S. Wilson, J. Cohen, "Poll: Republican Backing for Afghanistan War Slips," *Washington Post*, 12 April 2012.

<sup>16</sup> U. Friedman, "10 Foreign-Policy Flashpoints in the GOP Platform," *Foreign Policy*, 24 August 2012, [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

<sup>17</sup> R. Paul, *Romney's wrong on Middle East, defense spending*, CNN, 11 October 2012, [www.edition.cnn.com](http://www.edition.cnn.com).

<sup>18</sup> *Obama: Weak Job Ratings, But Positive Personal Image*, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 19 January 2012, [www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org); *Obama's Economic Approval Rating Improves*, Gallup, 9 February 2012, [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com); see also F. Zakaria, "Failure to Launch," *Time*, 6 August 2012.

<sup>19</sup> M. Cohen, "Pretty Vacant," *Foreign Policy*, 31 August 2012, [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

<sup>20</sup> M. Allen, J. Vandehei, "Mitt Romney Advisers Clash over Libya," *Politico*, 30 September 2012, [www.politico.com](http://www.politico.com).

<sup>21</sup> D. Pletka, "Romney's Missing Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, 7 October 2012. Pletka was the vice president at the American Enterprise Institute.

<sup>22</sup> *An American Century: A strategy to Secure America's Enduring Interests and Ideals, A Romney for President White Paper, with a Foreword by Eliot Cohen*, 7 October 2011, [www.mittromney.com/sites/default/files/shared/AnAmericanCentury-WhitePaper\\_0.pdf](http://www.mittromney.com/sites/default/files/shared/AnAmericanCentury-WhitePaper_0.pdf).

power...that can provide the foundation of an international system that ensures the security and prosperity of the United States,” and that as president, Romney “will proceed with clarity” in promoting democracy and liberal institutions. The values that the United States stand for make it the “last best hope of earth” and “the best guarantor of peace and the best patron of liberty.” America should maintain its military superiority “because weakness tempts aggression.” Indeed, the white book is replete with references to America’s rivals (China, an increasingly assertive Russia, and the “rogue states”—Iran and North Korea) and threats to U.S. security (Islamic terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and instability generated by so-called failed states). Romney announced that, as president, he would reverse the defence budget cuts, because “the cost of preparedness [to face security challenges] may sometimes be high, but the cost of unpreparedness is almost always higher.” Last but not least, the white book previews a decisively pro-Israeli policy, which sees the security of the Jewish state as the single-most important determinant of the U.S. policy towards the Middle East.

That Romney would embrace neoconservative ideas is hardly surprising. Neoconservatives are the foreign policy establishment of the GOP, and Romney was running as a candidate of the party elites. Still, on at least two counts he hinted at limitations to his receptiveness to neoconservative recipes. First, he ignored calls from leading neoconservative pundits<sup>23</sup> and foreign policy heavyweights of the GOP, such as John McCain and Lindsay Graham, to demand a no-fly zone over Syria. Instead, in order to differentiate his message from that of the Obama administration, the Romney team stuck to pressing for arming the Syrian rebels directly, yet stopping short of deploying U.S. military assets inside Syria.<sup>24</sup> Second, while Romney remained extremely critical of Obama’s handling of the issue of Iran’s nuclear programme, and during his trip to Israel in late July all but endorsed an Israeli military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities,<sup>25</sup> he nonetheless shunned the neoconservative idea of Congress passing a resolution authorising the use of force in Iran—something that would constitute an extremely belligerent act.<sup>26</sup>

Nor was the neoconservatives’ dominance unquestioned when it came to staffing Romney’s potential national security team. The announcement that the transition process would be led by Robert Zoellick, former head of the World Bank, and a senior official during both G.W. Bush terms—first as the United States Trade Representative (USTR), and then as Deputy Secretary of State under Condoleezza Rice—was interpreted not only as an indication that the actual national security team would be more moderate than the circle of campaign advisers suggested, but also that Romney’s hard-line approach towards China would give way to a more conciliatory stance. As the USTR, Zoellick presided over China’s entry to the World Trade Organisation, and remained one of the most ardent advocates of engaging China as a “responsible stakeholder” (a term that he authored). Perhaps crucially, Zoellick’s name was often circulated as the future head of the Department of Treasury in a Romney administration. It would be the Treasury (and the Department of Commerce) that would have to lead the way in making good on Romney’s campaign promise to label China as a “currency manipulator”—a widely advertised move that the Republican candidate pledged to make as early as on the first day after taking office with the intention to “level the playing field” in U.S.-Chinese economic relations, but in effect risking a trade war with Beijing. In fact, the idea of challenging China in this way was absent from both the Romney campaign’s white book on foreign policy, and from Romney’s earlier book, *No Apology*. On the contrary, Romney wrote that “China desperately needs our trade and goodwill,” and that “it is in [America’s] best interest to draw China into the circle of responsible nations,” thus aligning himself with the long-standing Republican tradition of engaging China (indeed, it was president Richard Nixon who began this process) and recognising that this relationship will by necessity involve both cooperation and competition.<sup>27</sup>

If Romney were elected, the ideological flavor of his administration’s foreign policy would be decided by the choice of his closest co-workers, of which the hitherto personal decisions need not be indicative—with the notable exception of Paul Ryan, whose actual position as vice-president would almost certainly outweigh the constitutional prerogatives. Even then, it is important to remember that in case of George W. Bush’s administration, the decisively neoconservative instincts did not come to

<sup>23</sup> M. Boot, “No-Fly Zone Needed with Syria,” *Commentary*, 24 July 2012, [www.commentarymagazine.com](http://www.commentarymagazine.com).

<sup>24</sup> J. Rogin, “Romney Campaign: No to Syria No-fly Zone for Now,” *The Cable*, 28 August 2012, [www.thecable.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.thecable.foreignpolicy.com).

<sup>25</sup> P. Rucker, J. Greenberg, “Romney in Israel: Any and All Measures Should Be Used to Dissuade Iran,” *Washington Post*, 29 July 2012.

<sup>26</sup> For the reasoning behind this idea, see for example E. Abrams, “Time to Authorize Use of Force Against Iran,” *The Weekly Standard*, 21 August 2012, [www.weeklystandard.com](http://www.weeklystandard.com).

<sup>27</sup> M. Romney, *No Apology: Believe in America*, St. Martin’s Griffin, New York, 2010, pp. 66–71.

the fore until after 9/11. Back in 2001, it was the neoconservatives who had both access to the levers of the decision-making process in Washington, and a vision that fit the need of the day. In other words, in Romney's case the actual influence of conservatives and neoconservatives might not become visible until the United States is faced with an acute international crisis, or a seminal decision, which normally puts a presidential administration into a higher gear. Barring such an occurrence, it would seem more probable that Romney's managerial, pragmatic background, as well his instinctive desire to cut deals—he may be an enigma when it comes to foreign policy, but hardly anyone questions his can-do, business-like attitude—would have him steer a more prudent course in foreign policy, if only because United States cannot afford a hawkish, transformative approach to the world, either politically and strategically, or economically. America's relative position is in decline, not least because of the economic crisis and internal budgetary pressures. A decade of overseas interventions sucked up valuable resources and reduced the appetite for military adventurism. While neoconservatives might want to wish it all away, the United States can ill-afford to ignore the interests of the so-called emerging powers and new centres of global politics, or to act irrespective of financial constraints. At a time when top U.S. military officials argue that the number one security threat to the nation is the public debt, it may turn out to be too hard to keep pressing for defence spending at the level of 4% of GDP. At the same time, if the Republicans were to fail in their quest to recapture the executive in 2012, it is pretty certain that the intra-GOP debate on foreign policy that surfaced during this election season would continue to be relevant—such is the long-term vitality of the three traditions of thinking about America's role in the world.