

Romney Still Trying to Have It Both Ways on Foreign Policy

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“Trying to have it both ways, while running up massive debt” may not be the successful slogan for the Republican Party, but it would be accurate. The Republican refusal to see the obvious contradiction between preaching the need to balance the budget while advocating for policies that would increase the debt is neatly captured in Mitt Romney’s recent foreign policy speech.

The speech itself did not so much lay out a coherent foreign policy vision for the future as much as it sought to secure Romney’s credentials as a critic of President Barack Obama and true believer in the infallibility of U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. military. Lines like “If you do not want America to be the strongest nation on Earth, I am not your president. You have that president today,” or “In an American Century, America has the strongest economy and the strongest military in the world. In an American Century, America leads the free world and the free world leads the entire world,” are either simply right-wing rhetoric, the former, or platitudes, the latter. Coming from Rick Perry or Michele Bachmann, these lines might be true representations of the depth of their thinking on foreign policy. Coming from Romney these remarks seem, at least to some degree, like true representations of what he thinks he needs to say to win the Republican nomination.

Romney’s foreign policy speech is more about staking claims in the Republican primary than about presenting a framework for what a Romney foreign policy would look like, but it should still not be dismissed altogether. The most striking thing about Romney’s speech is not the predictable and too-meaningless-to-be-offensive rhetoric about America’s strength and the suggestion that President Obama is not sufficiently patriotic to lead America on foreign policy. Rather, it is Romney’s commitment to an expensive and internationalist foreign policy that in no way recognizes the growing multi-polarity of the world or the need for the US, over the next few years, to reorient its position in the world and begin to scale back its network of bases, assistance and military presence around the globe.

Romney’s commitment to a strong and aggressive American foreign policy is not surprising from a Republican politician and fits naturally with the neoconservative wing of that party, but it is extremely inconsistent with the rhetoric of fiscal prudence, reduced spending and smaller government which has been at the center of the Republican Party since Barack Obama became president. It is very difficult to take anything Romney takes seriously about the need to cut spending when his foreign policy vision indicates that he would not only expand spending on defense and foreign policy but likely make commitments which would ensure increase US spending going forward for several years.

Recent Republican presidents, including George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan, increased spending on defense — in the case of Bush through two expensive wars, which combined with tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans contributed to severe fiscal problems for the federal government. Last week, Mitt Romney all but promised he would do the same. In the past,

Republican presidents and their supporters have either simply ignored the conflict between their anti-government rhetoric and their penchant for spending or insisted that defense and related expenditures are sacrosanct and somehow do not count or contribute to the debt. Romney's speech reflected a continuation of that kind of magical thinking.

For all of Romney and other Republicans' hostility towards President Obama for daring to suggest, although only occasionally and without putting any policy actions behind these words, that the U.S. may need to scale back its presence in the world, it is precisely those policies which will have to be followed by any president who is serious about reducing the debt. The Republicans have had it both ways on this issue for three decades, but political and economic realities indicate that time may be coming to an end.