

The START Treaty and Partisan Politics

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For many years the notion that partisan politics ended at America's shores contained a smattering of accuracy with a healthy overlay of propaganda. There have been too many exceptions over history for that phrase to contain more than a kernel of truth. Partisan disputes about entrance into World War II, Cold War strategy and the Vietnam War were just some of the times that the American political leadership was divided on key foreign policy questions during the time when this framework was allegedly at its strongest. Since the Vietnam War era, disputes over foreign policy from Central America to the Middle East have been a constant presence in our political life.

Two Republican opposition to the proposed new START treaty highlights the evolving and significant relationship between partisan politics and foreign policy in the U.S. and suggests that partisanship is beginning to play a new role in foreign policy. The START treaty is supported not just by the White House, but by [much of the defense establishment](#) as well as [our key NATO allies](#). The Republican arguments against the START treaty is not just an ideological difference on an important foreign policy question like those that were common during the Vietnam War era or around the current war in Iraq. Instead, they [appear to be explicitly partisan in nature](#). Republican opposition to START seems to have emerged simply because the new treaty is the product of a Democratic administration.

Opposing the Obama administration on absolutely everything has recently proven to be a powerful electoral strategy for the Republicans, it is far less clear that this is a good national security strategy. It also sets a very dangerous precedent by basing opposition to a foreign policy simply on partisan politics. Republicans may argue that this is no different than what Democrats did during the Bush administration with regards to Iraq and Afghanistan, but this argument would be wrong. While anti-war activists expressed no shortage of rancor and anger towards President George W. Bush and the Republicans, this was a result of, not the cause of, their opposition to the war in Iraq.

Gratuitous Republican opposition to Obama's foreign policy is particularly striking given the largely uncontroversial nature of Obama's foreign policy, particularly with regards to major issues. The Obama administration has continued the war in Afghanistan while playing rhetorical games about drawdowns and deadlines, institutionalized a U.S. presence in Iraq while calling it the end of the war and had some words with the Israeli government about continuing to build settlements without doing anything. While these actions may not be consistent with the radically neoconservative policy of the first six years of the Bush administration, they are certainly within the mainstream of Republican and even Democratic thought on these issues.

To a great extent Obama has demonstrated the extent to which partisanship genuinely ends at our shores. After a decisive election victory on a campaign promise of change, Obama has crafted a foreign policy that is defined at least as much by continuity from the previous administration as by change. His foreign policy, while a disappointment to much of the activist wing of the Democratic Party reflects the elite bipartisan consensus, albeit a frequently flawed one, which exists on most issues. The Republican opposition to the START treaty indicates that even this is changing.