



10 Foreign-Policy Flashpoints in the GOP Platform

The Republicans will present a united front at the convention, but divisive issues are bubbling below the surface.

BY URI FRIEDMAN | AUGUST 24, 2012



Next week, at the Republican National Convention, delegates won't just be nominating a presidential candidate; they'll be voting on a 60-page policy platform prepared earlier this week in Tampa, Florida, by 112 Republican delegates. The platform, which won't be publicly released until Monday (Politico discovered a draft that was briefly posted online on Friday), has mainly attracted attention so far for its anti-abortion language.

But the committee also tackled pressing foreign-policy questions -- and the debates that ensued speak to the divisions that lurk behind the cohesive worldview the party will present to the nation next week.

Sure, non-binding party platforms may have a limited impact on the positions presidential candidates take and the ways Americans vote, but they nevertheless highlight the issues at the center of a party's effort to define its international posture; in this case, the GOP's struggle to reconcile presumptive nominee Mitt Romney's embrace of American exceptionalism with Texas Rep. Ron Paul's considerably more modest vision of American power.

What are the most notable takeaways from this year's platform-drafting process, beyond one eagle-eyed delegate requesting that a reference to "Czechoslovakia," which ceased to exist in 1993, be changed to the "Czech Republic?" Here's a deeper look at what one committee member has called the "most conservative platform in modern history."

Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Far and away, the most controversial part of the GOP's foreign-policy platform was the section tentatively titled, "Our Unequivocal Support for Israel," which stated that Republicans "envision two democratic states -- Israel with Jerusalem as its capital and Palestine -- living in peace and security" -- language that is nearly identical to wording used in the party's 2008 platform. The passage provoked a raft of amendments arguing that, in endorsing the two-state solution, the Republicans were dictating the terms of a peace agreement to the Israeli government.

"The overwhelming majority of Republicans don't support the creation of another terror state like the ones that have since been created in southern Lebanon and Gaza," declared South Carolina delegate Randy Page. "We cannot continue to endorse [President Barack] Obama's policy of forcing Israel to negotiate in the face of suicidal risk." Page complained that the party's Israel plank was "a nearly identical copy of the Democrats' Israel platform" (the 2008 Democratic platform also supports a two-state solution).

In fact, it was President George W. Bush, who in 2002 became the first U.S. president to explicitly call for an independent Palestinian state and in 2007 hosted a conference that, as the Wall Street Journal put it, "enshrine[d] the two-state solution as the mutually agreed-upon desired outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

But the Republican Party has grown more reluctant to spell out the parameters of Israeli-Palestinian peace ever since last year, when Obama backed a two-state solution roughly based on the pre-1967 borders. Romney and his running mate Paul Ryan have criticized that decision, though both have expressed support for a two-state solution as well.

A resolution at the RNC's winter meeting this year appeared to reject the two-state solution -- proclaiming "that peace can be afforded the region only through a united Israel governed under one law for all people" -- though party officials hinted at the time that the language would not find its way into the platform adopted at the presidential convention.

They were right. At the platform committee deliberations, Jim Talent, a Mitt Romney surrogate and former Missouri senator, ultimately fended off the flurry of amendments, arguing that Israeli Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly endorsed the two-state solution as Israeli government policy.

Defense spending

The Republican pledge to cut government spending has not extended to the military, driving a wedge between Ron Paul supporters, who want to scale back costly foreign adventures, and the Republican base. Romney and Ryan have called for increasing defense spending, though Ryan voted for defense cuts back in 2011.

At the platform committee meeting, Christopher Stearns, a Paul supporter and delegate from Virginia, raised concerns about language opposing impending automatic cuts to defense spending, known as sequestration. "These cuts are not cuts," he explained. "They are cuts out of proposed increases over the course of a decade. We need to be honest with ourselves when we're addressing these issues."

The effort failed, however, and the plank resisting sequestration remains in the platform. The document also calls for a constitutional amendment requiring a supermajority in Congress "for any tax increase with exceptions for only war and national emergencies."

Gays and women in the military

Romney has a complicated position on the "Don't Ask Don't Tell" (DADT) policy that until recently governed homosexuality in the military. He expressed support for gays and lesbians serving openly in the armed forces in 1994, defended DADT in 2007 (because, he said, it was wartime), and suggested he would not restore DADT after Obama scrapped the policy in 2011.

Unlike the 2008 GOP platform, which emphasized the "incompatibility of homosexuality with military service," the 2012 platform does not explicitly reference gays in the military at all, perhaps in a nod to the middle ground that Romney has staked out on the issue. Without calling for reinstating DADT, the document dismisses the "use of the military as a platform for social experimentation," opposes "anything that might weaken team cohesion, including intra-military special interest demonstrations" (a reference to wearing military uniforms in gay pride parades). and promises to "enforce and defend in court the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), in the armed forces as well as in the civilian world" (a reference to same-sex marriage ceremonies performed on military bases).

The platform also pushes back against the Obama administration's decision in February to open up more combat positions to women -- a move former Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum criticized because "men have emotions when you see a woman in harm's way." While the GOP applauds the "advancement of women in the military," the platform notes, it also supports "women's exemption from direct ground combat units and infantry battalions" (women are still banned from serving in the infantry under the Pentagon's new rules).

Immigration

The GOP finds itself in a difficult position on this hot-button issue, desiring to both win over Hispanic voters in swing states and project itself as tougher on illegal immigration than Obama. That bind is reflected in the Republican platform, which both calls for a "legal and reliable source of foreign labor through a new guest-worker program" -- a first for the party's platform -- and embraces hard-line language on immigration. "We recognize that if you really want to create a job tomorrow, you can remove an illegal alien today," Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, told the committee.

Kobach, an architect of the controversial immigration laws in Alabama and Arizona, persuaded delegates to add language supporting the state immigration laws that are now the subject of federal lawsuits, calling for the completion of a double-layer border fence with Mexico, withholding federal funding for "sanctuary cities" and universities that offer in-state tuition rates for undocumented students, and backing the mandatory national use of E-Verify, an Internet database administered by the federal government, to confirm workers' legal status.

The changes, which were adopted over the objections of delegates who contend that the measures will hurt small businesses, bring this year's platform in line with its predecessor in 2008. The platform also throws party support behind "humane procedures to encourage illegal aliens to return home voluntarily" -- an endorsement of the "self-deportation" scheme that Romney floated during the primary.

Kobach -- who also ushered through an amendment prohibiting U.S. courts from considering foreign legal traditions such as sharia law -- argued that his suggestions were consistent with Romney's immigration stance, despite the fact that the initial 2012 platform draft, which did not include Kobach's provisions, was drafted in consultation with a Romney campaign that has toned down its tough immigration rhetoric since the primary. To which a Romney campaign advisor responded, "The platform is a RNC document, not a Romney for President document."

Cuba

As the Los Angeles Times reports, the GOP's language on Cuba closely mirrors the tough rhetoric the party employed in 2008 (to the point of repeating the florid description of Cuba as a "mummified relic of the age of totalitarianism"). Here's some of this year's wording, as obtained by the LA Times:

We will stand with the true democracies of the region against both Marxist subversion and the drug lords, helping them to become prosperous alternatives to the collapsing model of Venezuela and Cuba.

We affirm our friendship with the people of Cuba and look toward their reunion with the rest of our hemispheric family. The anachronistic regime in Havana which rules them is a mummified relic of the age of totalitarianism, a state-sponsor of terrorism. We reject any dynastic succession of power within the Castro family and affirm the principles codified in U.S. law as conditions for the lifting of trade, travel, and financial sanctions: the legalization of political parties, an independent media, and free and fair internationally-supervised elections.

But here's the catch: There's no explicit mention of rolling back Obama's efforts to make it easier for Cuban Americans to travel to Cuba and send money back to relatives on the island. Outside the platform, however, Romney has denounced Obama's Cuba policies, while noting that he would "thank heavens" when Fidel Castro "returned to his maker." Ryan initially opposed the Cuban embargo in the name of free trade, though he has since reversed that position.

Detention of enemy combatants

Against the backdrop of Obama's unexpectedly aggressive national security policies, the GOP platform committee meeting featured a fascinating conversation about detainee rights and counterterrorism. Pat Kerby, a delegate from Nevada, offered an amendment opposing the indefinite detention of American citizens under the National Defense Authorization Act. "It's not beyond [the Obama administration] to use things like the IRS to go after donors for conservatives," he argued. "The idea of granting this power to government is in defiance of the constitution." Minnesota delegate Kevin Erickson agreed on the broader point, declaring, "The fact that we have a president who has ... an assassination czar and a kill list is an abomination to our constitution." (Erickson may have been referring to recent reports on Obama's intimate involvement in the targeted killings of suspected terrorists.)

The amendment was ultimately defeated. "It doesn't matter if the enemy combatant is a U.S. citizen or not," noted Jim Bopp, co-chairman of a platform subcommittee on constitutional government. "If they are fighting for a foreign country or foreign interest, they can be so held."

National security leaks

On the campaign trail, Romney has repeatedly accused the Obama administration of boasting about the killing of Osama bin Laden and opportunistically leaking classified information

But Erickson, the Minnesota delegate and Ron Paul supporter, took issue with that approach at the platform committee meeting, urging the party to remove an entire section condemning Obama's leaks "for political purposes."

"If you're in activist circles, this may be really great to talk about over coffee, but it does not play well with middle-class America," he explained, noting that he hailed from a "very blue area of a very blue state." The response to a request for a second to Erickson's amendment? Crickets.

Nation-building

Romney has criticized Obama for announcing a withdrawal timetable for Afghanistan, though both candidates have been pretty downbeat about the unpopular war. But at the platform committee meeting, Richard Ford, a delegate from Rhode Island and Ron Paul supporter, went one step further, proposing that the party add a line in the document declaring, "the Obama administration has made the mistake of following the failed and dangerous policy of nation-building."

"Nation-building is a failed policy of the Democrats and we Republicans need to go back to the humble foreign policy of George Bush before 9/11," he stated. "We need to go back to not creating democracies overseas that create Islamic regimes, and go back to the goal of getting our enemies and bringing our troops home as soon as possible."

Former senator Talent batted down the amendment. "I'm very concerned it would be read, and may be intended to be read, as getting out a whole range of tools that we regularly use in foreign policy in order to protect American security at as inexpensive a cost as possible -- tools by which we assist other countries in developing grassroots democratic and economic institutions," he observed. "[We] ought to be trying to assist Libya as it emerges as a democracy. That doesn't mean we have to go in and build a nation."

Foreign aid

At the committee deliberations, Ford, the Rhode Island delegate, also requested a motion to strike the platform's entire section on international assistance, explaining, as Ron Paul has often argued, that the United States should halt costly and ineffectual foreign aid. Again, Talent preserved the language, which, as displayed at the committee meeting, reads:

Foreign aid should serve our national interest, an essential part of which is the peaceful development of less advanced and vulnerable societies in critical parts of the world. Assistance should be seen as an alternative means of keeping the peace, far less costly in both dollars and human lives than military engagement. The economic success and political progress of former aid recipients, from Latin America to East Asia, has justified our investment in their future. U.S. aid should be based on the model of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, for which foreign governments must, in effect, compete for the dollars by showing respect for the rule of law, free enterprise, and measurable results.

Romney, for his part, has expressed disdain for foreign aid in the past, once remarking, "I happen to think it doesn't make a lot of sense for us to borrow money from the Chinese to go give to another country for humanitarian aid." Ryan's "Path to Prosperity" budget plan doesn't mention international development once and proposes slashing funding for entities such as the State Department and USAID by nearly \$5 billion for fiscal year 2013.

Internet freedom

Ron Paul and his son Rand joined a push to defend the Internet from government regulation back in July, and the issue now appears to have made its way into the Republican platform. The Daily Caller has received language that would amount to the first GOP plank on "Internet freedom." The section reads, in part:

We will resist any effort to shift control away from the successful multi-stakeholder approach of Internet governance and toward governance by international or other intergovernmental organizations.

The Democrats may not be far behind, however. As Rebecca MacKinnon recently pointed out in Foreign Policy, there is a growing bipartisan consensus in Washington "around the idea that a free and open global Internet is in the United States' strategic interest." Earlier this month, U.S. News & World Report noted that the Democrats might also adopt a plank supporting Internet freedom globally in order to woo "Internet voters."

Taken together, these contentious issues highlight the divisions between the Republican Party's Romney-style internationalists and Paul-style noninterventionists heading into the convention. The congressman from Texas scored some successes during the platform-drafting process, including calls for an audit of the Federal Reserve and a commission to consider a return to the gold standard. But while Paul will get a video tribute in Tampa, his differences with Romney on foreign policy will be downplayed -- for a few days, at least.
