

# **The Problem With Romney: We Don't Live in an American-Dominated World Anymore**

**By Dr. John C. Hulsman**

## *Introduction: The GOP Presidential Contest is Over*

Forget the breathless swooning of the political commentariat about the upcoming South Carolina Primary being too close to call. Even in the still unlikely event of a Gingrich upset victory there (and his ex-wife's charge that he wanted an open marriage in the 1990s will do little to help him in the socially conservative Palmetto state), the Republican race for the 2012 presidential nomination is over, almost before it has begun.

Let's take a look at the primary calendar. After South Carolina comes Florida, by far the largest state contested so far and one where retail hand-shaking is out and money, organization, and TV buys to cover its vast area are in. Romney is streets ahead of his surviving conservative rivals (Gingrich and Santorum) there, who will continue to divide the anti-Romney vote. Next up will be Nevada and Michigan, whose polling shows Romney comfortably ahead in both. Michigan looks particularly like Romney country; the candidate's father George was a long-time popular governor there. Face it, if Romney wins South Carolina it's over; if he narrowly loses it will be over. It's time to leave the myopic world of GOP politics, and look at what the nominee actually plans to do should he be president.

## *A Foreign Policy That Might Work in 1990*

While it is unrealistic to expect any candidate to fill in all the policy blanks of what they would do if elected, the outlines of Mitt Romney's foreign policy are clearly visible. It is over the Iranian nuclear crisis that the candidate has been most clear and detailed. His Iranian policy makes sense...but only if you enter your time machine and set the controls for about 1990.

**The generation since has seen the basic structure of the world go from unipolar to multipolar; the US, while remaining presently first among equals, has a number of competitors nipping at its heels in a way it simply did not following the demise of communism. In that simpler time, America for good and ill, shaped events. Today, the US no longer largely on its own determines what will happen in today's messier world.**

**In the endless series of Republican candidate debates, Mitt Romney has been at great pains to make Iran a foreign policy wedge issue. He has stated simply, 'If we reelect President Obama, Iran will have a nuclear weapon...If you elect me as the next President Iran will not have a nuclear weapon.' So what magic trick does Romney possess that the hapless White House has been unable conjure up?**

**Well....nothing. Romney has gone on, confidently stating that he can curb the mullah's drive to acquire nukes through tough sanctions, covert and overt support for domestic opposition groups within Iran, and making clear that the threat of American military strikes remain on the table.**

**In other words, he is rather confusingly parroting the policy that his nemesis, President Obama, has settled on.**

**The one critical and unspoken difference between the two can only be guessed at, but it is the ultimate question. If push comes to shove and Iran breaks out of the NPT, deciding to acquire the bomb, the Obama White House is still likely to fall back on a strategy of deterrence (extending nuclear guarantees to the Gulf states and other allies in the region and offering them advanced missile defense) rather than militarily striking Iran's nuclear sites. With Romney, the reverse suspicion seems likely; when it comes to it, he will (either by coordinating with Israel or on his own) use air power to try to set Iran's nuclear program back.**

**The idea that America can successfully take out Iran's nuclear program harkens back to an earlier era, where the US could afford to shoot first and ask questions later. In such a unipolar (or in the Cold War bipolar) world the superpower has a great deal of leeway. You can get a lot wrong at the margins without it really mattering strategically. Lose in Vietnam? It doesn't really matter as you win the Cold War. Fall to**

pieces over a handful of casualties in the 1990s in Somalia? Utterly unimportant strategically, as you have no primary interests in the country in the first place. Wars and humanitarian interventions of choice are eminently doable for a superpower with strategic give; whose dominance is so far and away unquestioned that it can afford an almost endless series of tactical mistakes. But in a multipolar world the margin for such foolishness is infinitely smaller; wars of choice and unilateral thinking in general (which makes perfect sense if you are the only game in town) have to go out the window if a declining superpower is to halt its slide in an epoch with multiple peer competitors, ones who every year get a little bit economically stronger.

If the John Wayne theory (shoot first and apologize after, if you kill the bartender by mistake) doesn't work any more, the second part of the Romney critique of Obama over Iran is equally nonsensical in the world we actually live in. Aping the views of the hapless George W. Bush administration, Romney has ridiculed Obama's early attempts at engaging Iran's leaders as exhibiting monumental naivety.

It is such views themselves that are otherworldly. We simply don't live in a world where the rest of the planet at some primal level craves American attention, as though the world were some passive-aggressive sullen teenager who beneath it all simply wanted daddy to love them. Such an out-of-touch view is precisely what drives the rest of the world (friends and enemies alike) crazy about American arrogance.

Nor does this view pass the historical laugh test. From the Olympian heights of American power, FDR still rightly deigned to talk to and align America with the blood-thirsty Stalin, in order to dispatch Nazism from the face of the planet. Likewise Nixon's America, in reaching a rapprochement with Mao--probably in terms of numbers the most murderous man to have ever lived--strategically completely negated US losses in Vietnam, at one brilliant strike decisively turning the tables on the USSR. Moral superiority is a luxury an America far weaker than it was in FDR and Nixon's day simply cannot afford.

For talking to the mullahs in Iran can only lead to one of two results: either such talks will lead to agreement largely on America's terms (no nuclear weapon for Iran), or it will not. Critically, if it is this more likely second option that comes to pass, at least

**Obama can go to the international community and genuinely say he has walked the extra mile to achieve agreement. It is by going through the process in a good faith way that will enable America to far more easily assemble an international coalition to confront Iran. That is what the diplomatic minuet is all about; not stupidly believing in the good intentions of one's foes, but in organizing the process so if the worst comes to the worst, America finds itself surrounded by allies prepared to contain and constrain a recalcitrant Iran. I cannot think of anything more realistic, or more hard-headed.**

**For in the end, in devising a policy for the wrong era—assuming America can still do pretty much as it pleases when the actual key decisions over Iran will be made in Tehran and Israel—it is Romney who shows himself to possess an Alice-in-Wonderland view of America's present place in the world. Wishing things does not make them true; America remains powerful, but not all-powerful. The failure to get this central fact right is the surest way to corrode America's position in the world, and quickly.**

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