



BGS Advisory Board Member Brian Hook In *The Daily Beast* Discusses The John Hay Initiative's Goals For The 2016 Presidential Elections.

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Romney Foreign Policy Team Is Schooling 2016's Republicans

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By Josh Rogin

The 'John Hay Initiative' has been working secretly for over a year to keep a large part of the Romney foreign-policy team together, and it's ready to help top contenders—even Hillary.

Early in 2013, leaders of the foreign policy team that guided presidential candidate Mitt Romney regrouped under a new banner and began working to influence lawmakers and potential 2016 GOP presidential candidates, keeping their work secret.

Now the "John Hay Initiative," a nonprofit organization named after the private secretary to Abraham Lincoln who eventually rose to be Teddy Roosevelt's secretary of state, is planning its first public event, a national security speech by 2016 hopeful Sen. Marco Rubio on September 17 in Washington.

The group of more than 150 senior foreign policy and national security experts and former officials was founded by three of the top leaders of the Romney 2012 foreign policy team: Eliot Cohen, former State Department counselor; Eric Edelman, former undersecretary of defense for policy; and Brian Hook, former assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs.

Mitt Romney is on the group's advisory council, along with top Romney campaign foreign policy representatives Sen. Norm Coleman, Sen. Jim Talent, Tim Pawlenty, Amb. Paula Dobriansky, and Michael Chertoff, among others.

America may not be clamoring for the return of Romney, but the Hay Initiative is betting that Romney's foreign policy will be increasingly attractive as Obama's foreign policy continues to appear to be floundering.

"For the last 60 years there has been a bipartisan tradition of American leadership that is now being called into question. We are trying to restore that tradition," Cohen told The Daily Beast. "Our biggest allies in this argument have been Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi."

Ever since Romney lost the election, the Hay Initiative has been churning out policy papers, backgrounders, talking points, and a weekly newsletter for members called "The Hay Bulletin." Leaders of the group have briefed multiple potential GOP presidential candidates, top lawmakers, and senior Hill staffers on a regular basis for over a year.

"There certainly are a lot of people from the Romney campaign, but we see this as having its own identity, one of a broad range of people who believe in American leadership abroad and are concerned about neo-isolationism in both parties," Hook said. "We want to be a resource to presidential campaigns in 2016, those who are interested in conservative internationalism and promoting American leadership and ideals."

The leaders of the group wouldn't disclose which GOP presidential prospects they have been meeting with, though their first public event is the September 17 Rubio speech.

The Florida senator certainly embodies the brand of conservative foreign policy the Hay Initiative supports, but its leaders said they wouldn't endorse any candidate, and as a 501(c)(4) classified nonprofit organization, they aren't even affiliated with any political party, officially.

"A lot of it is driven by the concern that if you look at both parties, and you can call it neo-isolationism, you see people really calling into question American leadership and that America has to be actuated by both its interests and its ideals," said Cohen. "The truth is you're going to have to reconstruct American statecraft going forward from 2017 onwards, coping with the consequences of what's happened over the last six and what will be eight years. No matter who is president in 2017, that's going to be a very difficult proposition."

The internal battle inside the GOP on foreign policy between the isolationists and the hawks has taken a turn in recent months, with top figures on the isolationist side such as potential GOP presidential candidate Sen. Rand Paul moving toward more aggressive stances on U.S. military involvement overseas. On the Democratic side, top senators, especially those running for reelection in November, have distanced themselves from an Obama administration foreign policy that Americans increasingly see as failing, according to polls.

For those Republicans who have long called for more direct U.S. involvement abroad, recent calamities in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere are vindication of their long-held criticisms of both the isolationist arguments inside their own party and the pragmatist rationale of the Obama administration's risk-averse strategy.

"We saw when we started this—and events since have really borne it out—that we are headed into a really challenging time, when all kinds of things go wrong when the U.S. does not choose to exercise its leadership

and when the U.S. is confused by the role that its own ideals should play in making its own foreign policy,” said Cohen.

Whether 2016 presidential candidates will agree remains to be seen, but the Hay Initiative said it would work with any of them, even Hillary Clinton. The group is already structured somewhat like a campaign foreign policy team in waiting, with a steering committee, an advisory board, and 18 policy working groups covering regional and functional topics ranging from Iran to foreign assistance to space policy.

“Our 18 working groups are a terrific resource to elected officials, whether they are running for president or not,” said Hook. “We do have a very strong interest in promoting our principles in the 2016 climate and look forward to working with campaigns across the spectrum.”

On Sunday, Romney himself ruled out another run in 2016 on Fox News Sunday. But he tore into President Obama’s handling of American foreign policy, using some of the same criticisms as his former advisers in the Hay Initiative, saying Obama’s view of America’s role in the world is out of the norm of both parties.

“The president has a very different foreign policy than that has been followed by our country over the last 50 or 60 years,” Romney said. “Look, he is so out of touch with reality that he hasn’t taken the action necessary to prevent very bad things from happening...When America is seen and the president is seen as being weak, bad people do bad things.”