



## When Obama and Romney Talk Foreign Policy, Who Wins?

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The presidential campaign will focus on foreign policy for a few hours on Tuesday when President Obama [addresses](#) the United Nations General Assembly in New York City while his Republican challenger Mitt Romney will address the Clinton Global Initiative just a few miles away. Each will try to wring some political advantage from speeches that are generally directed at foreign audiences.

Neither candidate is likely to come out a winner, although for different reasons. It will be difficult for President Obama to convince the electorate and the world that U.S. policies, particularly in the volatile Greater Middle East, are succeeding. But Mitt Romney's challenge is greater. He must convince voters that his policies would result in tangible gains. It isn't clear that they would, however, nor that his policies are sufficiently different from the president's to convince voters to change horses in mid-stream.

The president is likely to call for staying the course. Echoing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks from last week, he will try to convince the people of the Middle East that the United States remains their friend and partner, and he will tell skeptical Americans that the feeling is mutual. He may point to the large quantities of aid that U.S. taxpayers have sent to the region to win points with foreign audiences, but this risks alienating the voters here at home.

Obama may also emphasize that the United States intends to maintain a large military presence in the region so as to, as Secretary Clinton said last week, "help bring security to these nations so that the promise of the revolutions that they experienced can be realized." But foreign listeners aren't convinced that the United States has helped bring security to anyone, and they certainly don't want U.S. help now.

Obama's message to Americans, delivered between the lines of his UN speech, is that the United States cannot afford to disengage from the region. Be patient, Obama will say. Many decades of trying to manage the political affairs of other countries, often with the heavy hand of the U.S. military, has carried high costs and delivered few clear benefits, but it could have been worse.

Not so, says Romney and the Republicans. President Obama's outreach to the Muslim world has clearly failed, they claim. The Cairo speech in 2009, followed by the belated support for anti-Mubarak protesters in Egypt in 2011, and finally the decision to use U.S. military power to topple Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, don't appear to have purchased us much good will. On the contrary, anti-American sentiment is running high, higher even than when Obama took office, [according to some polls](#). The violence against U.S. officials and property merely punctuates the grim statistics, and invites ominous parallels to 1979.

But while Obama's task will be difficult, Mitt Romney has an even higher hill to climb. He must differentiate his policies from the president's and persuade U.S. voters, especially, but also the skeptics abroad, that his policies would be much better. His surrogates have implied that the events of the past fortnight certainly would not have occurred had Romney been in the Oval Office, but they haven't explained how or why that is true.

Meanwhile, the few concrete policies that Romney champions are deeply unpopular in the region, and not much more popular with U.S. voters. His calls to [add nearly \\$2 trillion in military spending over the next decade](#) suggest a willingness to increase the U.S. military presence around the world, but especially in the Greater Middle East. Most Americans want U.S. troops to be brought home. His leading foreign policy adviser has [criticized the Obama administration for refusing to intervene in the Syrian civil war](#). This suggests that the problem with U.S. policy has been too little meddling in the internal affairs of foreign countries, whereas most Americans believe that there has been too much. And Romney did not endorse [Sen. Rand Paul's effort to tie U.S. aid to conditions](#), so it is hard to see how he can score points against President Obama by promising to stick with the status quo.

However, all of these other issues pale in comparison to the most visible U.S. policy in the region of the past decade: the Iraq war. That disastrous conflict will hang heavily over Romney's speech, as it has over his entire campaign, and over the GOP for several election cycles. Although most Americans now believe that the war never should have been fought, and most non-Americans never thought that it should have been, Romney refuses to repudiate it. On the contrary, he has [staffed his campaign](#) with some of the war's leading advocates. Given [his famous aversion](#) to anything that might be construed as an apology, Romney is unlikely to evince any doubts about the war in his speech on Tuesday. But if he wants to convince voters that he will be a more capable steward of U.S. foreign policy than Obama has been, he must at least explain what lessons he takes away from an unpopular war. Otherwise, his implicit assertion that it couldn't get any worse will fall flat with those who believe that it certainly could.

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