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Mitt Romney struggles to differentiate his foreign policy from the president's

The Republican presidential nominee has had sharp criticism for Obama's approach — but has said little about what he would do differently.

By Maeve Reston and Seema Mehta, Los Angeles Times | May 31, 2012

[Mitt Romney](#)'s foreign policy argument against a second term for [President Obama](#) has been sharp: He says his Democratic rival has made the U.S. less safe by failing to lead on the world stage.

Romney has roughed up Obama with a hawkish tone — at times bordering on belligerent. Yet for all his criticisms of the president, it has been difficult to tell exactly what Romney would do differently.

He has argued that reelecting Obama will result in [Iran](#) having a nuclear weapon — without explaining how. He has charged that Obama should have taken "more assertive steps" to force out the repressive regime of Syrian President [Bashar Assad](#) — but has said he is not "anxious to employ military action." He accused Obama of tipping his hand to the Taliban by announcing a timeline for withdrawal of American troops from [Afghanistan](#), but also accepts the 2014 timeline.

Romney's approach could be seen in his take on the case of [Chen Guangcheng](#), the blind Chinese activist who in early May sought shelter at the American Embassy before leaving his country. As American officials negotiated over his fate, Romney suggested that the Obama administration had put Chen in danger to placate the Chinese.

He said that if reports he had heard were true, "this is a dark day for freedom and it's a day of shame for the Obama administration."

Two weeks later, when Chen arrived in New York, Romney declared himself "relieved" and said the episode "underscores the need for the United States to forthrightly stand up for the human rights of the Chinese people."

At no point did he elaborate on how his approach would have differed from Obama's.

Christopher Preble, a foreign policy expert at the **Cato** Institute, a libertarian think tank, says he does not yet see "a huge difference" between the foreign policy approaches of Obama and Romney.

"A lot is made of Romney's tough talk with respect to **Russia** and Iran and **China**, but even there it's not like I see a dearth of toughness on the part of President Obama," Preble said. "As a challenger, for someone like Mitt Romney, it really is incumbent on him to draw distinctions and differences. He doesn't. It allows people to paint with a broad brush [what] they would guess ... his response would be."

By portraying his opponent as a feckless commander in chief, Romney is playing on historic Republican criticisms of **Democrats** as insufficiently tough. But that task is more difficult this year as he faces a war-weary public and an incumbent president with some notable foreign policy victories, including the targeted killing of Osama bin Laden.

Foreign policy is not Romney's strength; 2008 **GOP** nominee **John McCain** defeated the former Massachusetts governor in primaries that year in part because of his international expertise. In **Washington Post**-ABC News poll last month, 53% of respondents said they trusted Obama to do a better job handling international affairs. Thirty-six percent picked Romney.

That may also be due to the lack of distinctions between the two. In 2008, Obama and McCain used the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to differentiate themselves from primary opponents, and their proposals remained a central issue until the economic collapse that September.

This year, Romney and Obama agree on the basic timeline of the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan; Romney's chief critique has been his assertion that the president's actions are driven by political considerations. He says he would give greater deference to the generals on the ground.

Romney did not agree with Obama's decision to withdraw 33,000 surge troops before the end of the fighting season this year. But neither candidate has offered specifics on what size the U.S. combat force should be in 2013.

On Iran, Romney frequently faults Obama for waiting too long to put "crippling sanctions" in place on the central bank and the petroleum industry, measures that the Obama administration agreed to late last year. But when asked what further steps Romney would take to crack down on Iran, campaign aides said they were keeping an eye on legislation working its way through Congress that would put sanctions on regime officials and that Romney's main task would be to make sure the current sanctions are vigorously enforced.

In addition, Romney has said he would do more to support dissidents in Iran and make it clear that military action by the U.S. is a real option (something Romney charges Obama has failed to do, though the president has repeatedly said all options are on the table).

Two areas where clear differences exist are on policy toward Syria and on defense spending. On Sunday, Romney reiterated his call for the U.S. to work with Turkey and **Saudi Arabia** "to organize and arm Syrian opposition groups" with the goal of forcing Syria's Assad from power.

Obama has said Assad must step down, and the administration has backed the peace plan brokered by **United Nations** special envoy **Kofi Annan**. On Tuesday, seeking to increase pressure on Assad after the massacre of more than 100 people in Houla, the U.S. and other nations expelled Syrian diplomats.

Romney charged Sunday that Obama had "merely granted the Assad regime more time to execute its military onslaught."

On defense spending, Romney has railed against cuts that amount to as much \$1 trillion over the next decade (half of the cuts were initiated by Obama and the other half negotiated in a deal with Congress). In January, Obama called for shrinking **the Army** and Marines by 100,000 troops, along with other reductions meant to make the military leaner. (He argued that the defense budget would still grow over the next decades, but that the rate of spending growth would slow.)

Romney, by contrast, has called for increasing active-duty military personnel by 100,000 troops and boosting the nation's fleet. He has also said he would increase defense spending — by ensuring that the budget would not fall below 4% of the nation's gross domestic product. He has not said, however, how he would pay for that increase, which some analysts project would add more than \$2 trillion in government spending over the next decade.

As he has campaigned, the Republican nominee has shifted the positions he held during his first run for president, though his aides attribute that to changes in global relations over the last four years.

In 2008, Romney said the United States should do more to prevent intellectual property theft by China and to persuade China to allow the marketplace to determine its currency's exchange rate.

This time, he has called China a "cheater," and said it is in a trade war with the U.S. On his first day in office, Romney has said, he would issue an executive order labeling China a "currency manipulator" and directing commerce officials to consider new duties on Chinese imports if the nation does not move to stop artificially depressing its currency's worth, which gives its goods a competitive advantage.

In 2008, Romney called for more collaboration with China and Russia. In a debate four months ago, he put Russian leader **Vladimir Putin** in the same category — among the "world's worst actors" — as **Cuba's Fidel Castro** and Iran's **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**. He labeled Russia the United States' "No. 1 geopolitical foe," in a March interview on **CNN**. The latter statement drew widespread scorn as a throwback to Cold War-era politics.

Yet Russia represents another instance in which Romney and Obama don't differ much, despite the rhetoric. Romney has assailed Obama as trying to appease the Russians by scrapping a George W. Bush-era plan to build a missile-defense system in Eastern Europe, and replacing it with a different plan to be completed by 2020. Yet Romney says he is willing to commit to the same timeline.