

Detroit Free Press

A GANNETT COMPANY



GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney has sharply criticized President Barack Obama on foreign policy issues. / Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

By Maeve Reston and Seema Mehta | June 3, 2012

LOS ANGELES -- Mitt Romney's foreign policy argument against a second term for President Barack Obama has been sharp: He says his 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, it has been difficult to tell exactly what Romney would do differently.

He has argued that re-electing Obama would 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 has accused Obama of tipping his hand to the Taliban by announcing a time line for withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, but also says he accepts the 2014 time line.

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 U.S. in Beijing before leaving his country. As American and Chinese officials negotiated Chen's 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 safely in New York with his family, 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 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, compared with 36% for 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 time line 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 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 faults Obama for waiting too long to put "crippling sanctions" in place on the central bank and the petroleum industry, measures the Obama administration agreed to late last year. But asked what further steps Romney would take, aides said they are keeping an eye on legislation that would put sanctions on regime officials and that Romney's main task would be to make sure current sanctions are vigorously enforced.

Two areas where clear differences exist are on policy toward Syria and on defense spending. Last Sunday, after more than 100 people were slaughtered in Houla, Romney reiterated his call for the U.S. to work with Turkey and Saudi Arabia "to organize and arm Syrian opposition groups" to force 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 in Houla, the U.S. and other nations expelled Syrian diplomats.

Romney said those tactics had "merely granted the Assad regime more time to execute its military onslaught."