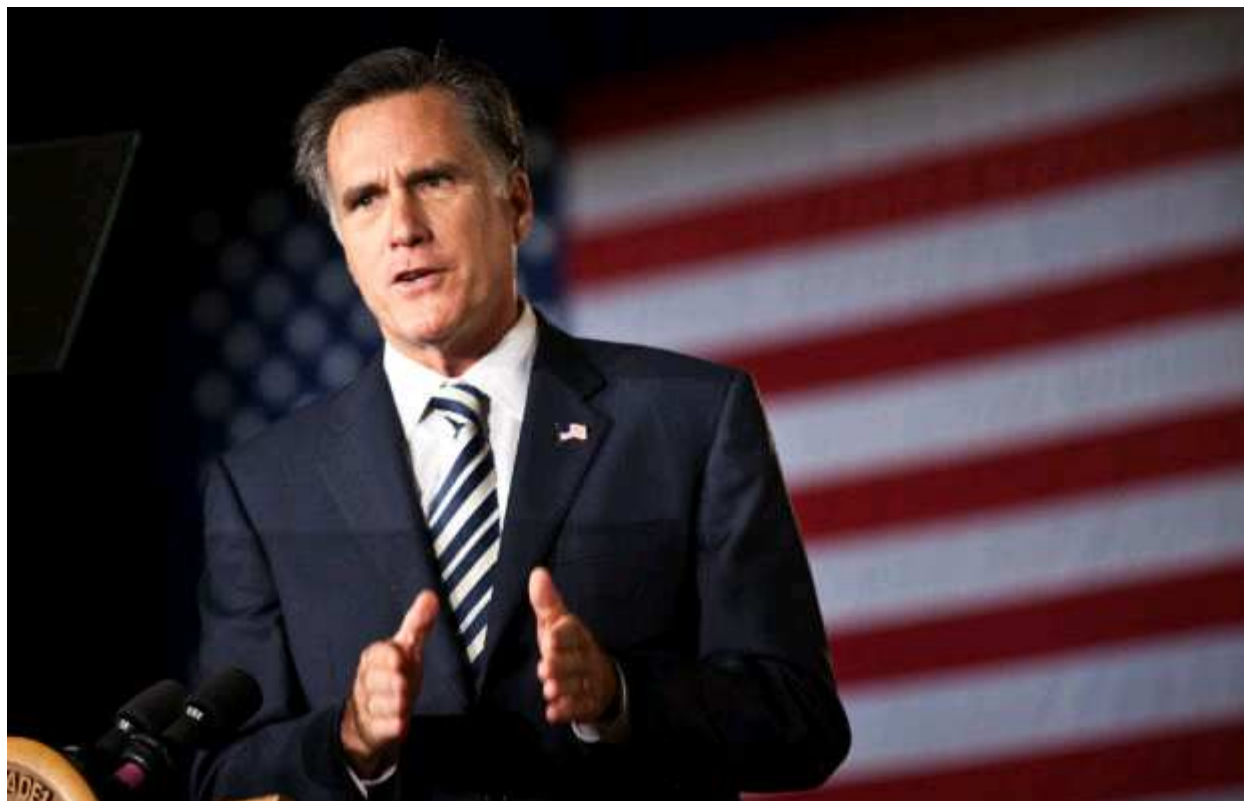


The political illogic of Romney mounting a foreign policy offensive

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By Justin Logan

The past week or so has seen a [number](#) of [articles](#) discussing Mitt Romney's foreign-policy message, with a surprising number of aides whining to the press that the candidate isn't paying their issue enough attention. Today, [Politico reports](#) that the Romney campaign has decided that "they must do more than simply hammer the incumbent on jobs" and consequently Romney is considering an overseas tour in late July in an effort to:

move away from a campaign message devoted almost singularly to criticizing President Barack Obama's handling of the economy...

[...]

[The trip's goal will be to] project Romney above the campaign's daily nitty-gritty and cast him as a plausible commander in chief at ease with foreign leaders and the general public in distant capitals...

This is insanity. Whether or not Romney follows through on this is going to say a lot about the candidate's judgment.

According to [Politico](#), Romney is considering expanding his trip to Great Britain and Israel to include Germany and Poland, but having apparently ruled out a visit to Afghanistan.

Let's start with that last one, Afghanistan. Here it seems the Romney people have realized that Bill Kristol's suggestion, that he "go and look serious," is absurd. Going there at all is a huge lose. It's a zero-sum tradeoff between saying things the public will like and saying things Kristol and his foreign-policy team will like. The public [loathes the war](#), but the Kristol and the [Romney foreign-policy staffers](#) like it a lot. So if he went and said anything the public wants to hear -- like that he wants America to leave soon -- he'd get trashed in the media by his foreign-policy team again. And if he gave a sop to his foreign-policy team, the public would worry he's Bush redux. So they're smart to stay away from Kabul.

But what about the rest of the trip? On Israel, the *Politico* piece quotes an "informal foreign policy adviser to Romney's campaign" saying that "there are a lot of donors and potentially a few voters in places like Florida for which [sic] it sticks in people's craw that Obama hasn't been there yet." There is probably considerable fundraising upside from [super-wealthy donors who affiliate strongly with the Israeli right](#), and perhaps some marginal vote to be won, although that last part is less persuasive. Obama could easily reply that Israel's defense minister shot back to a question this week asking whether Obama is a "friend of Israel" with the succinct answer, ["Yes, clearly so."](#)

And what about the rest of the trip: Poland, Great Britain, and Germany?

It's tough to say what political advantage Romney thinks the trip to Poland will gain him. There was a lot of conjecture about a domestic political rationale for Bill Clinton's support for NATO expansion, but if Dick Morris can be trusted on the matter, ["Neither I nor the president ever believed there is such a thing as a Polish vote."](#)

There's also a danger that defending Romney's Poland-related policy preferences will allow Obama to go on offense. For example, Romney has made a [mountain](#) out of the [molehill](#) that is the New START treaty, which [the Poles supported enthusiastically](#). So while the missile defense issue that Romney apparently wants to bring up could put him on the side of the Poles, Obama could just as easily point out how he shepherded through a treaty that the Poles support and Romney opposes.

Apparently the logic for Britain is that the Olympics will be held there, and for Germany it is that the Euro may collapse there. These rationales hold up better on substance, but still don't make much sense. Romney presided over the successful Salt Lake City Olympics, which might reiterate the image of Romney as successful leader. On Germany, if Europe implodes, it is going to be hugely consequential for the United States, but this is too wonky a discussion to have in front of the median voter. So there is a substantive reason, but it's tough to see a political logic for it.

Sometimes foreign-policy wonks [have trouble](#) divorcing what they are interested in from what voters are interested in. For the most part we live in a bubble of public intellectuals, insulated from the collapse of the national economy. For a refresher, let's have a look at [what voters were interested in as of May](#):

Most Important Issue in the Presidential Election

(Percentage among registered voters)

Economy and jobs: 62

Federal budget deficit: 11

Health care: 9

Same-sex marriage: 7

Foreign policy: 4

Immigration: 2

Maybe missile defense has ticked up a few points since then, but if Romney's going to win this thing, he's going to win it on jobs, the economy, and the deficit. I like discussing foreign policy as much as anybody, but going to Poland and Israel isn't going to win the election for him. As [Daniel Larison](#) sensibly concludes at the *American Conservative*,

"Unlike Obama, Romney is running against a sitting president during a time of very slow (and possibly stalling) economic recovery. That makes the decision to spend any time out of the country even harder to understand."

Unless I'm missing something big here, every minute Romney spends overseas is a minute he's spending away from winning the election. So tell me what I'm missing.

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