



Should a presidential candidate talk about foreign policy?

Posted By [Daniel W. Drezner](#) ■ Monday, July 9, 2012 - 4:03 AM

The news that Mitt Romney is **planning** a overseas trip/foreign policy address has led to some... interesting reactions among libertarians/realists. Even before the trip was announced, **Daniel Larison thought it was a bad idea** for Romney to focus on foreign policy at all. After the trip was trial-ballooned, **Larison still thought it was a bad idea** -- as did Justin Logan at the Cato Institute (**guest-posting on Steve Walt's blog**).

As **someone who thought this wasn't the worst notion in the world**, it's worth reviewing their objections. In toto:

1) *Romney's neoconservative-friendly foreign policy views are unpopular in both the United States and many of the countries on Romney's itinerary -- so there's no upside.* As **Larison puts it**: "Romney's hawkish critics haven't fully grasped that foreign policy has become a weakness for the GOP over the last six years, so it makes no sense to them that it might help their presidential candidate to avoid talking about it."

2) *This is an election about the economy, and any energy Romney devotes to foreign policy is wasted.* As Logan notes, "Sometimes foreign-policy wonks **have trouble** divorcing what they are interested in from what voters are interested in.... Unless I'm missing something big here, every minute Romney spends overseas is a minute he's spending away from winning the election."

3) *Even if (1) and (2) do not apply, there is very little political upside to be gained from visiting other countries.* Larison goes through the various possible upsides for a challenger to go abroad, but doesn't find them terribly convincing.

So, how to respond? First, let's parse this out into two questions. First, should candidates talk more about foreign policy because it's good for democracy? Second, is it in their own political interests to talk more/visit other countries?

I hope Larison and Logan would agree that, political imperatives aside, it would be A Good Thing for the Country if presidential candidates talked more about foreign policy. Presidents have much more leeway in conducting foreign policy than domestic policy. They wind up spending about half their time and energy as president on foreign policy. Given its importance to the office, the fact that it's not talked about all that much during the campaign is kinda problematic. It might be worthwhile for major party candidates to openly discuss/think about their foreign policy views just a bit.

Now, on whether it's politically savvy for presidential candidates to talk about this stuff, **I largely agree** with Logan and Larison. Voters don't care about foreign policy. In Romney's case, however, there are a few reasons why a summer foreign policy trip makes some sense.

First, er, it's the summer. Logan is correct that foreign policy wonks tend to confuse what interests them with what interests the public, but so do campaign advisors. The undecideds aren't dwelling on politics at the moment, and likely won't do so until after the Summer Olympics are over. All these people will do is process the occasional headline. If Romney has to choose between **this headline** and ones about foreign policy, he might prefer the latter.

Second, at least one of his foreign policy trips will play well domestically. Larison and Logan grumble about it, but they both appear to acknowledge that the Israel leg of the trip would likely fire up the evangelical base and peel off disaffected Jews from Obama's coalition. If he's going all the way to Israel, then a few more days/stops make some sense.

Third, and finally, Romney dug his own grave on this issue. In **op-ed** after **op-ed**, Romney has relied on blowhard rhetoric and **a near-total absence of detail** to make his case. In doing so, Romney is the one who has sowed the doubts about his foreign policy *gravitas* in the first place. If his campaign manages to produce a successful foreign policy speech/road trip, he can dial down one source of base criticism -- and focus again on the economy in the fall. And eliminating base criticism matters domestically -- the media tends to magnify within-party critiques as being more newsworthy.

The best criticism is Larison's contention that the actual content of Romney's foreign policy vision might not go down so well with the American people. This might be true, but it might not be. The thing is, no one is entirely sure what Romney thinks about foreign policy. Maybe his op-eds were nothing but rhetorical bluster -- **as campaign musings about foreign policy tend to be**. It's also possible/likely that whatever foreign policy speeches he delivers in the next month or so wouldn't match his actions once in office. As I noted last year, however, there is value in having a presidential candidate demonstrate "**generic foreign policy knowledge**."

I suspect both Larison and Logan would prefer a foreign policy in which the United States doesn't aim to do as much abroad, allowing the country to retrench and revitalize the domestic economy. That's a compelling argument (and, actually, **one that President Obama made** in his first few years of office). Just because Romney might disagree with that approach, however, is no reason for him to clam up on foreign affairs this summer. As a democracy, we're entitled to hear about how he thinks about these issues. Politically, a well-executed foreign policy trip won't net him a lot of votes, but it would cauterize a festering political wound and allow him to pivot back to the economy.