



Mitt Romney tries to get his foreign affairs in order

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In the classic American showdown over who winds up in the White House, a Republican accuses his Democratic rival of being easy on America's enemies and a lightweight on foreign policy. In this election, however, that strategy isn't working.

While Mitt Romney has accused President Barack Obama of being reckless on issues such as dealing with Iran, he doesn't offer up a clear alternative. On other issues – such as the timetable of America's withdrawal from Afghanistan – his vision hardly deviates from his opponent's.

One of Mr. Romney's problems is that most Americans overwhelmingly trust Mr. Obama over him to lead them on international affairs, according to numerous polls. This is the president, after all, who managed the targeted killing of Osama bin Laden, end the costly involvement in Iraq and is pulling American troops out of Afghanistan. Mr. Obama, who entered the Oval Office under a cloud of public doubt over whether a liberal law professor from Harvard with a taste for arugula would be an effective commander-in-chief, is ending his first term having defied expectations.

Mr. Romney, by contrast, is catching flak from within the ranks of his own party for holding a worldview that has been labelled vague and out of touch. Sarah Palin may have been ridiculed for claiming she could see Russia from her Alaskan backyard. Mr. Romney is being mocked for characterizing Russia rather than, say, Iran or North Korea, as America's greatest geopolitical threat.

"Well, c'mon," said former secretary of state Colin Powell in a particularly scathing interview recently on MSNBC. "That isn't the case."

With the election barely four months away, Mr. Romney has yet to make a major speech on foreign policy as the presumptive Republican nominee for president. But he has lashed out at Mr. Obama, accusing him of making America less safe by failing to lead on the world stage. He has been short, however, on specifics of how he would do things differently.

"It's hard to tell, but overall I think his worldview falls somewhere in between the two Bush presidents. He is less centrist than the father, but less of an extreme activist than the son," said Richard Stoll, a professor of political science at Rice University in Houston.

"Romney touts his experience in the private sector," Prof. Stoll added. "He says he knows how to handle the economy. He can't make the same argument about foreign policy, so he won't. That's fine. Right now the economy is the critical issue."

Republican strategists say part of the reason Mr. Romney isn't focusing on foreign policy in this campaign is because it doesn't matter very much to American voters.

When asked what they consider "the single most important issue" in their choice for president, 52 per cent of adults surveyed in a May Washington Post-ABC news poll cited jobs and the economy. In a May New York Times-CBS News poll, only 4 per cent of Americans picked foreign policy as their top election concern, a significant drop from the last presidential election. In 2008, about 20 per cent of voters cited "Iraq" or "terrorism" as the most important issue facing the country.

The lack of interest can partly be explained by the curious confluence between the two presidential candidates on foreign policy, a vastly different scenario than in the 2008 presidential race when Mr. Obama and his then-rival, Senator John McCain, had sharply divergent views on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

So far, most of Mr. Romney's statements on world affairs have seemed off-the-cuff. He promised that if elected he would ensure that Iran won't develop a nuclear weapon. If his opponent wins, however, he said he believes it will.

On other pressing foreign policy issues, any differences between the outlook of the two candidates seems to dissolve under questioning.

On Afghanistan, Mr. Romney said Mr. Obama wrongly tipped his hand to the Taliban by announcing a timeline for withdrawing troops. But he also agrees with the President's 2014 exit date. Similarly, he has denounced Mr. Obama as being soft on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, but has said he is not "anxious to employ military action" in that conflict.

Worryingly for Mr. Romney, endorsements have been slow to trickle in from Republican foreign policy heavyweights. This month, former secretaries of state Condoleezza Rice and George Shultz backed him.

Others, however, have been conspicuously silent. Henry Kissinger has not endorsed him yet. Nor has Brent Scowcroft, who has advised four former Republican presidents on foreign policy. Colin Powell derided his characterization of Russia as America's greatest threat as a calcified throwback to Cold War mentality.

Mr. Romney's team says the candidate will elaborate a more detailed foreign policy in the coming weeks. In the meantime, he has sought to woo the military, saying he would be more deferential to military generals on the ground than his opponent, and would expand the military by 100,000 active-duty soldiers and build up its navy fleet. He has also vowed to increase defence spending, pegging it to four per cent of the country's gross domestic product.

But Mr. Romney is still failing to leverage opposition among the American public over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, said Christopher Preble, a vice-president at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

"Governor Romney has staked out a vague position that is less politically popular than President Obama's position," Mr. Preble said. "That puts President Obama in a good

position. He can say to voters, 'You may not agree with what I'm doing, but you're going to disagree even more strongly with my opponent.'"