

# **GANNET NEWS SERVICE**

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## **GOP candidates critical of Obama foreign policy despite successes**

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President Barack Obama can run for re-election on some tangible foreign policy successes, including the killing of Osama bin Laden and Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. But Republicans seeking his job say he has been too timid and too political on the world stage.

Obama says he is fulfilling promises to end the war in Iraq and begin withdrawing from Afghanistan, to kill and capture terrorists, and soften America's "cowboy" image under George W. Bush through diplomacy and collaboration with other nations. Most Republican presidential candidates say Obama has responded weakly to "Arab Spring" democratic uprisings and the Iranian nuclear threat; that he dismisses the idea of American "exceptionalism"; and that he accelerated withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq to boost his re-election chances.

The economy is expected to continue to overshadow overseas issues in the 2012 campaign, but potential budget cuts have thrust defense and national security back into play. Because of the failure of a congressional supercommittee to cut debt, automatic spending cuts are scheduled to reduce defense-related spending by almost \$500 billion over nine years beginning in 2013.

The Pentagon budget increased from \$513 billion in Obama's first year in office to \$548 billion in fiscal year 2011, not counting \$467 billion spent in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2009-2011. Obama has proposed cutting future defense spending by \$350 billion over 10 years. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has warned the additional automatic cuts, should they take effect as scheduled, would cause irrevocable damage.

Obama's decision to send 30,000 additional troops into Afghanistan to fight the Taliban quelled criticism he was a dove, but his plans to begin bringing those troops home in the summer of 2011 drew criticism from six of the eight leading GOP candidates. Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas, and former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman favor withdrawal from Afghanistan as soon as possible.

Doug Bandow, a national security expert at the conservative Cato Institute., said that "on substance there is very little difference between Obama and George W. Bush. Both increased troop levels (in Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively). The military budget has gone up. . . . So it is hard to claim Obama is a wimp."

Paul advocates the deepest cuts in defense, arguing the U.S. should bring home virtually all troops from foreign bases. Huntsman's proposal to withdraw from Afghanistan would cut overall defense spending. The remaining GOP field opposes cuts except for waste and abuse. Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney would increase troop and ship levels, but has not specified how much and what that would cost.

## CANDIDATES

Obama has encouraged "Arab Spring" democratic movements, but Romney, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., criticized him for being tardy and tepid in condemning autocratic leaders in Egypt and Syria, and in responding to the Libyan civil war. Rep. Michele Bachmann of Minnesota opposed U.S. involvement in Libya and subsequently has called for Libya's new government to reimburse U.S. military expenses.

Obama's critics say his sanctions-first efforts haven't stopped Iran's nuclear program. Only Paul has explicitly ruled out using force to stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. Candidate Herman Cain has said he would support Israeli military action if convinced of success. Gingrich supports bolder covert aid for anti-regime movements throughout the Middle East, including Iran.

Obama has not ruled out any options to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons. His national security adviser, Thomas Donilon, said in November that Iran's standing in the Middle East has declined as a result of U.S. actions and economic sanctions.

Obama has tried coaxing more cooperation from nuclear-armed Pakistan while also criticizing its leaders for a lack of cooperation. Relations between the two countries soured in 2011 as U.S. drone strikes took place over Pakistani airspace, Navy SEALs killed bin Laden near a Pakistani military academy, and NATO troops killed two dozen Pakistani troops.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry says all foreign aid to Pakistan should be cut off until the Pakistanis are more cooperative -- a stance that Bachmann called "highly naive" because Pakistan is "too nuclear to fail." Paul supports cutting foreign aid in general, but the rest of the GOP field resists cutting Pakistani aid.

All Republican candidates accused Obama of softening U.S. support for Israel by proposing that borders between Israel and Palestine be returned to those that existed before the 1967 war. Obama's defenders say most Middle East experts contend negotiations for any lasting peace must begin with the 1967 boundaries.

## KEY STATISTICS

- The Pentagon budget increased from \$297 billion in 2001 to \$548 billion in 2011; the Afghanistan and Iraq wars cost another \$1.2 trillion. More than 6,300 Americans have been killed and another 46,000 wounded in the conflicts.
- The last 30,000 U.S. troops in Iraq are expected to leave by the end of 2011.
- Afghanistan troop levels are to fall from 97,000 in November 2011 to 70,000 by the end of 2012.

"Key sources: @

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