



Rewards and risks as Mitt Romney heads abroad amid campaign

By Niall Stanage - 07/23/12 05:00 AM ET

The first and probably only overseas trip of Mitt Romney's presidential campaign is full of opportunity for the Republican candidate. But the expedition also carries its fair share of risk.

Romney hopes the trip to Israel, Poland and the United Kingdom will burnish his stature, and that the Israel leg in particular might help capture extra support from a constituency — Jewish voters — that traditionally leans heavily toward the Democratic Party.

The trip is expected to begin Thursday and last for about four days. The schedule has not been finalized.

Critics charge that Romney has been less than sure-footed on foreign policy, and even prominent members of the GOP establishment have publicly dissented from some of his positions. That context raises the stakes for this week's journey.

The Israel leg of the trip will be more heavily freighted with political meaning than any other. President Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have long had a strained relationship. Romney and Netanyahu, by contrast, have known each other for decades, since working together in Massachusetts in the mid-1970s for the Boston Consulting Group.

Romney has in the past criticized Obama for having "disrespected" Netanyahu. He has been equally emphatic about the president's policy choices. Obama's suggestion that a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians should be based upon the pre-1967 borders was tantamount to having "thrown Israel under the bus," Romney said.

Romney's vociferous support for Israel raises hopes in some Republican minds that he can hold Obama below the 78 percent of the Jewish vote that he won in 2008.

"There are a lot of opportunities to make headway not only among Jewish voters but among Jewish donors," Republican strategist Keith Appell told The Hill. "The current administration has really rubbed a lot of people up the wrong way."

During a briefing for reporters last week, Dan Senor, a Romney foreign policy adviser with a specialization in Israel, acknowledged that the issue was an important one — but he also suggested Romney would keep any partisan opinions relatively mild and muted.

"We believe Americans of all stripes strongly identify with Israel. Gov. Romney believes support for Israel is an American value," Senor said. But he stressed that Romney looked at the trip as an opportunity for "learning and listening" rather than unveiling new policy positions.

Brian Katulis, of the liberal Center for American Progress, said he is "skeptical" that Romney could take any significant number of Jewish votes away from Obama. He added that there could be unintended consequences for any politician who would "do things that seem intended to make the U.S.-Israel relationship a wedge issue. Most pragmatic voices shy away from that."

The British leg of the trip gives Romney an opportunity to highlight a very different part of his political appeal. The Olympic Games will be getting under way as Romney arrives, and he is sure to reminisce about his own success in getting the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City back on track after preparations had seemed to slide into chaos.

Alex Wong, the campaign's top foreign policy adviser, noted that Romney has "a deep connection to the Olympic movement" and was "looking forward to celebrating this moment together with the English people."

Romney will also meet with British Prime Minister David Cameron and key members of his cabinet, including Foreign Secretary William Hague and George Osborne, who holds the position of Chancellor of the Exchequer, the approximate British equivalent to the U.S. Treasury Secretary.

All three men are members of the Conservative Party, and can be expected to be simpatico with Romney. The Republican will also meet the leader of the minority party in Britain's governing coalition, Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democrats, and the head of the opposition Labor Party, Ed Milliband.

In leaving the United States, even briefly, Romney will be ceding the domestic stage to Obama. But he will give a number of high profile interviews during his travels to try to maximize the trip's impact.

Romney's critics note that President Obama holds an overall advantage in most polls on foreign policy — a somewhat unfamiliar position for a Democrat — and that the Republican's pronouncements on international affairs have caused him some trouble in the past.

After Romney announced his opposition to the "New START" arms-reduction treaty with Russia, for instance, Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), publicly condemned him for raising "discredited objections."

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell criticized him for referring to Russia as the United States' "number one geopolitical foe." Powell said on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" in May: "Come on, Mitt: Think. That isn't the case."

Even as Republican loyalists trumpet the trip's capacity to simultaneously deepen Romney's gravitas and move the political agenda away from the troublesome ground of taxes, overseas financial holdings and his record at Bain Capital, others fear that there are plenty of dangers.

"It would seem to me that the wise course is not to talk about foreign policy at all," said Christopher Preble, the vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. "It doesn't play either to his strengths or to what the public wants to hear. I am genuinely puzzled by his decision to make this trip."

Key Romney advisers defend the exercise in equally emphatic terms.

During last week's briefing, the campaign's policy director Lanhee Chen said the trip "demonstrates Gov. Romney's belief in the worth and necessity of standing with our allies, and of locking arms with our allies."

Liberals still contend that there is too little specificity about his foreign policy positions overall. Katulis accused him of doing "a lot of [political] positioning rather than taking actual positions" and expressed doubt that the forthcoming trip will change that pattern.

But Republicans such as Appell argued that Romney's trip had a broader significance.

"Once you're effectively the nominee, it's more than appropriate to take at least one overseas trip and meet with other leaders," he said. "It's one of the most important things you can do. People have to see you as a strong leader on the international stage."