

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## Romney's Foreign Policy Opportunity

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Barack Obama and Mitt Romney will duel on foreign policy this week as they [both address](#) the national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and Romney heads off to Britain, Israel, and Poland to burnish his foreign policy credentials. It will be difficult for Romney to overcome Obama on this set of issues. Denizens of neoconservatism scorn the president as a weakling on terrorism and other international issues, but that is not how most Americans see him. The killing of Osama Bin Laden (as well as dozens of other high-level al Qaeda operatives) has largely inoculated Obama against the “weak on terrorism” allegation, and the public generally gives him decent marks on most other foreign policy issues.

In the two areas where there has been grumbling about the president's performance—escalating and perpetuating the war in Afghanistan and doing little about the bloated Pentagon budget—Romney's neoconservative allies advocate measures that [most voters](#) dislike even more than they do Obama's approach. If Romney is to seize the opportunity to score points against the president on foreign policy, he needs to break with the hawkish extremists in his party and take a very different tack than he has done so far in the campaign. Unfortunately, his harsh statements [toward China](#) and Russia—including [describing](#) the latter as America's principal global adversary—and his alarmingly [bellicose rhetoric toward Iran](#) suggest that he is taking his foreign policy positions from George W. Bush's playbook. That is a bad move both politically and in terms of good policy.

In his speech to the VFW, Romney should outline a new security strategy built on the foundation of cautious, national-interest realism—a position that once characterized the GOP and still finds some resonance among the party's rank and file. That move, though, would require him to challenge the neoconservative conventional wisdom on four major issues.

First, he needs to advocate a prompt withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, even faster than the Obama administration's alleged commitment to have U.S. forces out of that country in 2014. The intervention in Afghanistan is the poster child for how a limited and justified punitive expedition against a terrorist adversary (al Qaeda) can morph into an open-ended, nation-building crusade on behalf of an inept, corrupt Third World government. Unfortunately, it is [difficult to discern](#) whether Romney has a policy regarding Afghanistan. To the extent he has said anything substantive on the issue, it creates worries that he may want to keep American troops in that snake pit indefinitely.

Adopting a new, smarter position on Afghanistan leads to the second point Romney should emphasize in his VFW speech: a repudiation of nation building as a U.S. foreign policy goal. It is bitterly ironic that, beginning with the Bush administration, Republicans seem to have become more enthusiastic than Democrats about humanitarian interventions and nation-building ventures. Republicans rightly used to scorn such crusades as wasteful, utopian schemes. Condoleezza Rice once remarked that it should not be the mission of the U.S. military to escort children to school in foreign countries. Romney needs to return the GOP to that wise skepticism.

Third, Romney should advocate a complete reassessment of Washington's overgrown network of formal and informal security commitments around the world. It is absurd for the United States to continue subsidizing the defense of allies in Europe and East Asia two decades after the collapse of the Soviet empire and nearly seven decades after the end of World War II. Those allies shamelessly free ride on America's security exertions, choosing to under-invest in their own defenses and refusing to make a serious effort to manage the security affairs in their respective regions. Even if the U.S. government was cash-rich and running chronic budget surpluses, the current policy toward obsolete alliances would be wasteful and ill-advised. Maintaining such a policy when Washington has to borrow money from China and other foreign creditors to do so, borders on insanity.

Reassessing alliances and other security commitments points to the final change that Romney should advocate: a willingness to cut military spending. The United States spends nearly as much on the military as the rest of the world combined. The House of Representatives just voted to appropriate \$606 billion for defense—and that figure does not include \$11 billion to pay for the nuclear arsenal, [a budget item](#) housed in the Energy Department. Instead of promising to increase military spending to four percent of GDP—[an extra \\$2.5 trillion over ten years](#)—Romney should reverse course and support cutting that bureaucracy's budget as part of an overall austerity program for the federal government. And as noted, the overseas missions should be trimmed or eliminated to match [the capabilities and budget of a smaller force](#).

Such an agenda might not please the attendees at the VFW convention, and it certainly would not please the junior varsity from the Bush-Cheney administration that Romney has been relying upon thus far for advice on foreign policy. But it would appeal to a wide swath of American voters and put Barack Obama on the defensive. Most important, it would be a wise policy alternative for the American republic.