



## **Republicans Will Win the Foreign Policy Debate in 2016, Unless They Blow It**

By Trevor Thrall

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Republicans should dominate the 2016 presidential foreign policy debate, but only if they can avoid shooting themselves in the foot. Winning this debate could be crucial given the recent Huff Post/YouGov poll that found more Americans think the 2016 presidential election will focus on foreign policy issues than domestic issues. Historically speaking this is unlikely; elections almost always turn on the economy and domestic issues. But if the polls prove prophetic, it gives the GOP the advantage. Maybe.

### **Why Republicans Should Win the Foreign Policy Debate**

Though it's too early to know which Republican will win the party's nomination, the general arguments don't change much for any of the current frontrunners.

First, Republicans will benefit from the fact that Obama's foreign policy approval ratings have not broken 50% during his second term; they sat at 37% a January 2015 NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll. Since 2012, after seven years of favoring Democrats in the wake of the Iraq War, Americans again have more trust in Republicans to handle foreign policy. In short, Obama's incumbency will be a liability for any Democratic nominee no matter how much he or she tries to separate from the administration.

Moreover, Republicans have a cornucopia of legitimate criticisms to fuel the attack. The public, though not in agreement about what should happen, clearly believes that Obama should have been doing more to manage the turmoil in Iraq, Syria, Ukraine,, Iran, Nigeria...the list goes on. With so much to be unhappy about, Republican contenders should have little trouble making the general case that it is time for a change.

As a bonus, the Huff Post/YouGov poll also found that Obama's handling of foreign policy is tied with immigration for what upsets Republicans most about his presidency. Coupled with the Republican Congress' ability to keep Clinton's email and Benghazi role in the voters' minds, this

means foreign policy should be useful for motivating the Republican base in 2016 and generating donations even if it doesn't woo any swing votes.

### **Why It Might Not Be So Easy...**

Hillary Clinton, almost certain to be the Democratic nominee, is no Barack Obama when it comes to foreign policy. When she left her post as Secretary of State, Clinton enjoyed a 69% approval rating for her performance; just 25% disapproved. Republican frothing about Benghazi and private emails aside, most Americans remember her globetrotting days with admiration, not aggravation.

Second, Clinton is likely to enjoy 100% of the on-the-job executive experience in foreign policy compared to the current GOP frontrunners. Her experience will be especially useful during presidential debates, when her gravitas and experience will provide the greatest contrast with her opponent.

A final, potentially game changing factor is the Islamic State. The Islamic State situation already helps Republicans politically, but will play even better if the situation worsens and Americans become frustrated with setbacks, losses, or just plain lack of progress. Only 37% of Americans think Obama has a clear plan for dealing with the group and a recent CNN poll finds 58% disapprove of his handling of the campaign. If Obama sends in ground troops the likelihood of things going wrong will rise. Given the low probability of a quick and clear-cut U.S. victory over Islamic State, Obama runs a real risk of handing the Republicans a huge foreign policy advantage if he sends in the troops.

In the end, the biggest danger for Republicans will likely come from self-inflicted wounds. Criticizing Obama and Clinton on foreign affairs is a no brainer. But as the furor and backlash caused by the Senate Republicans' letter to Iran has shown, it is possible to go too far. Media coverage, editorials, and expert commentary has been overwhelmingly negative for the GOP, and early polls show most people think the letter was inappropriate. Even several Congressional Republicans now acknowledge that the letter was a bad move politically. In short, such actions undermine the ability of a Republican candidate to claim the mantle of serious steward of foreign policy from Democrats.

The letter snafu probably happened early enough that the eventual Republican nominee can avoid direct fallout, but the risk of going too far remains real. During the primaries the Republican contenders will inevitably compete to appear hawkish on foreign policy. If they become too enamored with muscular and assertive strategies for dealing with Syria, Iraq, Iran, and the Islamic State, however, Republicans risk losing swing votes from a public that remains war-weary and reluctant to commit ground troops yet again to solve problems in the Middle East.

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