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Foreign-policy fencing is Romney pivot point; Challenger's parries, thrusts were calculated

By Guy Taylor - 10/24/2012

Foreign-policy analysts have pointed to Mitt Romney's apparently calculated effort in Monday night's debate to tone down his previously hawkish posture on foreign policy, but on one issue, the Republican nominee pulled few punches; namely, in criticizing President Obama for not doing enough to stem the spread of extremism in the Muslim world.

Twice during the debate, Mr. Romney even homed in on the northwest African nation of Mali, lumping it with the unrest in the Middle East as he argued that the past four years under Mr. Obama have brought a "rising tide of violence, chaos [and] tumult" with al Qaeda and "other jihadist groups rushing in."

Mr. Obama largely deflected the challenger's criticisms by focusing on his administration's having overseen the locating and killing of Osama bin Laden, and asserting that his "strategy wasn't just going after bin Laden" but also creating "partnerships throughout the region to deal with extremism."

Consensus among most foreign-policy analysts was that the outcome was either a tie, or that Mr. Obama carried a slight edge and appeared more confident - as is traditionally the case for incumbents who have had four years to see the world from the Oval Office.

But some gave Mr. Romney credit for pulling off a small coup of his own in passing the overall "sniff test" on foreign-policy expertise by avoiding any major gaffes during the debate.

"What Romney needed to do was display basic competence on foreign policy," said Michael Rubin, a resident Middle East scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. "You can agree with Romney, or you can disagree, but he did show he's master of his game."

His performance was not without risk, however. In tying recent concerns over the presence of al Qaeda-linked groups in northwest Africa to his overall description of mayhem in the Middle East, Mr. Romney took a chance of sounding like he'd gotten his maps mixed up.

But the gamble appeared to pay off - at least in the sense that many observers thought the former Massachusetts governor had successfully pre-empted a

much-anticipated attempt by Mr. Obama to portray him as being stuck in the bygone era of foreign policy.

The recent action in Mali had already been mentioned by the time Mr. Obama told Mr. Romney: "I'm glad that you recognize that al Qaeda as a threat, because a few months ago when you were asked, 'What's the biggest geopolitical threat facing America?' you said Russia - not al Qaeda."

The president went on to quip that "the 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back because, you know, the Cold War's been over for 20 years."

Moving to the middle

With that exchange out of the way, several observers said Mr. Romney attempted to shift toward the center on almost every issue covered Monday night.

He delivered powerful statements - asserting that America's "purpose is to make sure the world is more peaceful" and that doing so "requires us to be strong." But he put the brakes on previous assertions of how vital the military's role must be in order to achieve such strength.

"It was sort of 'Etch a Sketch Mitt,'" said Justin Logan, director of foreign policy at the libertarian **Cato Institute** in Washington. "I thought he was really bobbing and weaving, and I don't think his neoconservative supporters were very happy with that."

With regard to the Middle East, when Mr. Romney "said that 'we can't kill our way out of this mess,' it seemed to me that he was trying to deflate this idea that he's George W. Bush redux," said Mr. Logan.

Some struggled to see clear light between the Mr. Romney and Mr. Obama. "What was surprising to me," said P.J. Crowley, who served in the Obama administration State Department until last year, "was that on most of the critical issues, the bottom lines were basically the same."

"There were several instances where Romney gave a detailed explanation of Obama's foreign policy," said Mr. Crowley, now a fellow at George Washington University. "They agreed that this was not the time for a U.S. military intervention in Syria; they agreed on the timeline of departure for U.S. forces from Afghanistan; [and] they agreed on the bottom line regarding Iran."

Such congruence could likely be credited to a strategy employed by Mr. Romney, said Clifford D. May, president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a conservative policy shop in Washington.

"He didn't diverge terribly far from Obama on a lot of the issues, and that may

have been useful from the point of view of political calculation," said Mr. May. "It would have been difficult for him to take a very different view from Obama and not have the president make him look like an extremist."

"I think there are a lot of people on the right who would have been geared up to hear a very clear message from Romney, that he was not going to let America's enemies prevail, that he was going to be more like Roosevelt and Churchill, but now I don't think any of them are going to say, 'Gee, I'm so disappointed that I'm not going to vote for him.'"