The Foreign Policy Debate

How Romney can show Americans he can be a capable Commander in Chief.

When the history of the Obama Administration is written, it will be noted that never before has an American President bet so much on the power of his own charisma to change the world. As Mitt Romney prepares for the foreign policy debate in Florida on Monday, his challenge will be to show what a losing bet that's been—and how a Romney Administration would do better.

That won't be easy to do, and not merely because Mr. Romney has so far proved less sure-footed on foreign affairs than on domestic policy. The power of incumbency carries with it the voice of Presidential authority, which Mr. Obama deployed effectively at Tuesday's debate when he took belated responsibility for the security lapses at the Benghazi consulate. The President has kept his promise to get out of Iraq and looks set to do the same in Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden is dead, as you may have heard.

Above all, Mr. Obama has presented himself as the antidote to the Bush Administration and all he said it represented: costly wars, harsh interrogations, global opprobrium. Mr. Romney should expect the President to try to define him as a Bush retread, and to paint America's foreign policy options as a choice between sober restraint and swaggering bellicosity.

***

We don't expect Mr. Romney to offer an explicit defense of the Bush Doctrine, never mind that its core tenets—keeping weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of rogue regimes and promoting liberal democracy in places like Egypt—are ones Mr. Obama rhetorically endorses. Nor do we anticipate that Mr. Romney will retreat from the protectionist rhetoric he's been peddling on China, though it would be nice to hear him recognize that the biggest "currency manipulator" in the world today is the U.S. Federal Reserve.

But Mr. Romney can help himself by offering a serious critique of Mr. Obama's foreign policy that doesn't descend to clichés (e.g., "I won't ever apologize for America"), and by laying out a vision that answers the needs of both the national interest and the self-interest of everyday Americans.

Mr. Romney should also give full credit where it's due, not least because some graciousness would be a refreshing contrast to Mr. Obama's abrasive partisanship in an area where Americans yearn for consensus. That
means not only commending the President for the bin Laden raid, but also for the areas in which
the Administration has adopted the policies of its predecessor: the reauthorization of the Patriot
Act; the use of military tribunals; the intensification of drone strikes; the (admittedly reluctant) non-
closure of Guantanamo. All that should cause some indigestion among Mr. Obama’s friends at
MSNBC.

Mr. Romney can also play to his own strengths by pointing out that a U.S. economic revival is
crucial to world stability. One reason America has less sway now than it did when Mr. Obama took
office is that the world won’t heed a great power whose policies produce slow growth and runaway
debt.

Ronald Reagan understood that before he could defeat the Soviet Union he had to show again the
superiority of the American model of economic freedom. The U.S. military will inexorably and
rapidly shrink without growth of 3% or more. This theme is right in Mr. Romney’s wheelhouse.

***

Moving to the President’s record, he likes to boast about responsibly ending the war in Iraq. Yet the
war had already been won when Mr. Obama became President thanks to a surge that he opposed as
a Senator—even as he later tried to emulate it in Afghanistan under the same military commander.
Mr. Obama also tried to negotiate a Status of Forces Agreement with Iraq that would have
maintained a residual U.S. military presence in the country, and Joe Biden even offered to “bet you
my Vice Presidency” on the negotiations succeeding. But they pursued it too half-heartedly to entice
the Iraqis to a deal.

The result is that American soldiers won a victory in Iraq at great cost only so Mr. Obama could
squander the strategic fruits of their victory: a viable alliance with Baghdad and a bulwark against
Tehran. Mr. Obama may think that he’s come out of this as a political winner, but nobody is happier
about his Iraq policy than the mullahs in Iran.

Now the U.S. runs similar risks in Afghanistan, the war Mr. Obama once said was the one we must
win but from which his Vice President last week promised full withdrawal by 2014—let the Taliban
do what it may. Given that Mr. Obama signed a Status of Forces Agreement with the Afghan
government in May that explicitly opens the door to a post-2014 U.S. military presence, Mr.
Romney might ask whether the President stands by his own signature—or by his Vice President? It
can’t be both.

Mr. Obama will no doubt reply that the U.S. cannot endlessly be at war in the Middle East. That’s
true, but Mr. Obama’s policies of premature military withdrawals have increased rather than
diminished the chances that we will be at war in the Middle East again. The Administration can
hope that its training of Afghan forces will suffice to keep the country together after 2014. But if it
doesn’t and the Taliban return, we will find ourselves back at square one—2,000 lives and hundreds
of billions of dollars later.

***

Mr. Obama is also courting war in the Middle East by his ambivalent posture on Iran’s nuclear
designs. Mr. Romney can applaud Mr. Obama for insisting that “all options are on the table” when
it comes to thwarting those designs, and for publicly opposing a containment strategy for a nuclear
Iran.

Yet the Obama Administration has consistently undermined its own message by advertising that it
believes a military option would be ineffectual, by failing to provide Israel with reassurances that it
needn’t consider its own military options, and by first resiting sanctions until Congress passed
them and then handing out waivers to those same sanctions. The result is that Iran has not been remotely deterred despite sanctions, and it is now only months away from being able to produce weapons-grade uranium.

If Mr. Obama implies (as he no doubt will) that Mr. Romney wants to start a third Middle Eastern war, the answer is that the only way to prevent one is to let Tehran know we're deadly serious. Weakness and indecision invite war, while credibility and resolve still have a chance to prevent it.

The same mixed-messaging helps explain why America's position throughout the rest of the Middle East is dramatically weaker than it was four years ago. The President's Cairo speech promised a new beginning with the Muslim world. Yet in practice Mr. Obama was friendlier to Hosni Mubarak than George W. Bush had been until Mr. Obama cut him loose in the final days, and he made no effort to push the Arab autocracies toward reform before their downfall.

The result, if you can believe it, is the worst of both worlds. The U.S. has become even less popular with the publics of such countries as Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan and Lebanon than it was in the last year of Mr. Bush's Presidency. And it also has less credibility with the rulers of those countries that have been our allies. When the Saudis invaded Bahrain, they never bothered to tell the U.S.

So much, then, for the transformative powers of Mr. Obama's charisma and good intentions—which have also failed to work their supposed wonders on the likes of Russia's Vladimir Putin (who continues to obstruct us at the U.N.), or of China's new leadership (which is trying to lay claim to most of the South China Sea), or even of little Cuba, which continues to hold American Alan Gross as a hostage. It has occurred too late to the President and his advisers that "smart diplomacy" mainly entails the calibrated uses of power, not the promiscuous promotion of personality.

As for Mr. Romney, he can't and shouldn't promise to return the genies to their bottles by reversing the gains of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood or renegotiating a new military agreement with Iraq. He also seems disinclined to propose anything more than Mr. Obama is doing to depose the Assad regime in Syria. But if nothing else he can explain the risks that Syria's expanding war poses to U.S. interests and allies and how a defeat for Assad would mean a defeat for Iran's growing regional influence.

***

More broadly, Mr. Romney can promise to restore America's credibility as a guarantor of peace and stability—not simply for the sake of far-flung peoples and countries, but for our own.

America has been the chief underwriter of global order for nearly seven decades, which has required large defense budgets and difficult military commitments. But we have also been a major beneficiary: no world wars; open sea lanes; expanding trade and freedom; and the human and economic possibilities of a world that, until Mr. Obama came to office, was freer than it had ever previously been.

In his farewell interviews, Mr. Obama's first Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, made a point of quoting Reagan's line that he had lived through many wars but not one of them began because the U.S. was too strong. Mr. Obama's first term has been marked by economic decline at home and less respect and influence abroad. Four more years of the same will tempt the world's rogues to become even more assertive.

On Monday night Mr. Romney can make clear that his foreign policy will understand that strength at home and confidence abroad aren't incompatible objectives, but are mutually reinforcing.
A version of this article appeared October 19, 2012, on page A12 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: The Foreign Policy Debate.