

In presidential debate, President Obama is no dove, and Mitt Romney is no hawk

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President Obama landed a lot of punches in the presidential debate on foreign policy with Mitt Romney in Boca Raton, Fla. He was sharp, aggressive, and generally presidential, attacking Mr. Romney in almost every answer. His boast about his strong and steady leadership as opposed to Romneys wrong and reckless leadership was telling. The president mocked his Republican opponents understanding of defense policy, explaining that the Pentagons horses-and- bayonets budget has fallen over time.

Mr. Obamas truest line of the night, however, was when he said to Romney: You say you would do the same things we did, but you would just say them louder... Many media commentators have drawn sharp distinctions between the two candidates on international issues. Global perceptions of the two men are also noticeably different: Most of the Western world wants Obama to win.

In truth, however, the foreign-policy similarities between the two men are more striking than the differences. Obama is not as left- wing and dovish as many believe, and Romney is not as right-wing and hawkish as he would have us believe.

Obama has governed as a cautious realist, focused principally on Americas national interests. Obamas speeches are about hope and change, but his foreign policy is about reasonableness and balance. He has also demonstrated a clear willingness to use force, sometimes unilaterally, to protect US security and interests.

It is harder to make judgments about Romneys foreign policies. His few interventions on the topic have not been impressive. If we believe his rhetoric, then should he be elected, the foreign policy right-wing is back in business. Romney has criticized Obama for being a serial apologizer, promised a more muscular approach toward Americas adversaries, and vowed to usher in a new American Century.

But Romneys heart doesnt seem to be in it. His character and experiences indicate that he would more likely be a careful, analytical foreign policy-maker, who bases his decisions on expert advice and facts rather than intuition.

Like Obama, Romney is a cautious, data-driven figure. He thinks with his head, not his gut. His proclivity for PowerPoint, like Obamas penchant for the TelePrompter, speaks to a desire for order and control.

There are many examples of foreign-policy convergence between the candidates. For example, Obama seems to no longer believe that coalition forces should (or even can) bring stability to Afghanistan. And he plans to withdraw nearly all troops by the end of 2014. Romney is more hawkish in tone, but the substance of his policy on Afghanistan is hardly different, and he has had his own timetable for withdrawal (though he now stands behind 2014), even if it contains more caveats.

In Asia, Obama seeks to cooperate with Beijing, but he also intends to renew Americas presence in the region and maintain a balance of forces at a time when there is significant uncertainty about Chinas future behavior.

Romneys rhetoric on China has been several notches tougher, but he has focused largely on economic matters. It is hard to imagine him buying into a "clash of civilizations" with China, or muscling up to Beijing in a provocative manner. A continuation of the Obama approach seems more likely. Indeed, in Boca Raton it was Romney who was the panda-hugger, rejecting Obamas characterization of China as an adversary.

When it comes to Iran, Obama started off trying to engage the mullahs, but quickly toughened his policy to encompass a tough sanctions regime and reported covert and cyber campaigns to slow the

nuclear program. Romney has been critical of Obamas approach and described the leadership in Tehran as unalloyed evil," but his stated policy on Iran is not noticeably different.

He may be more likely than Obama to authorize a military strike to interrupt the nuclear program. Then again, the riskiness of that option stayed George W. Bushs hand and Romney is a more cautious politician than Mr. Bush.

There are, of course, many foreign policy differences between the two men. One of the largest, and oddest, concerns Russia, where Obama has reset the relationship, while Romney has vowed to reset the reset. Romney would also likely be more pro-Israel than Obama. While Obama is a supporter of the United Nations, Romney is skeptical of multilateral institutions and promised to return these bodies to their proper role.

But the actual policy differences on these fronts are less than is generally believed.

The most important contrast lies in their foreign-policy experience. Obama has grown enormously in office to become a skillful and effective commander-in-chief; if Romney were elected, he would have his own learning curve to climb.

The biggest question mark concerns personnel. After nearly four years, we have a sense of the staff template Obama prefers: highly competent, disciplined, and loyal policy engineers who are largely content to implement his vision rather than argue with him over it. Romney is a more protean character, so the identity of his foreign policy picks would matter more.

Still, it is hard to discern a fundamental clash between the two men when it comes to their foreign policy world views. And even if a President Romney were minded to make instinctive, bold decisions, the lessons the United States has learned so painfully in the past decade would constrain any tendencies toward adventurism.

Americans have a foreign policy choice to make in November. But the world is not at a crossroads because of it.

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