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MINNPOST

Romney fights Cold War, Obama fights not to overreach

By Nick Hayes | 09/07/12



REUTERS/Maxim Shipenkov/Pool

Russia's President Vladimir Putin, right, greeting China's President Hu Jintao during their meeting at the APEC summit on Friday.

You probably already knew this about this year's presidential election. In any case, in Tampa and Charlotte, both Republicans and Democrats made it clear: If they have their way, this election will not be about foreign policy.

The Democrats should interpret the Republicans' reluctance to launch into a debate on foreign policy as a left-handed complement to President Obama. Republicans know their party enters this election without one of its perennial advantages. For the first time since the beginnings of the Cold War, Democrats outpoll Republicans on national security. The party that for generations was tagged by the Republicans as being "weak on national defense" just may have succeeded in re-branding itself as, to use Obama's favored phrasing, "tough but smart" on foreign policy.

The Republican Party **2012 platform** left its discussion of foreign policy to the very end as if the party hoped most readers would not get that far into the document. Under the header of "American Exceptionalism," the platform zeroes in on China as the "chief offender" in international trade and

proposes increased duties on Chinese imports. What's so "exceptional" about advocating an old fashioned trade war? And, is it smart to advocate one against the nation that is the largest holder of U.S. debt?



Otherwise, the platform recites a litany of familiar positions, including support for Taiwan, animosity toward Russia, praise for the United Kingdom, faint praise for the rest of Europe, a few bromides on India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and “unequivocal support for Israel.”

Style not substance

After reading the platform and watching the Republican National Convention, I realized that the Romney campaign, if it has to discuss foreign policy, wants to make the issue not the substance of Obama's foreign policy, but its style. Above all else, the Republicans fault

Obama for what he called “leadership from behind.” (Don't forget Obama coined the term to describe his approach to the overthrow of the Muammar Qaddafi regime in Libya and never mind that the strategy proved to be highly successful.)

The Republican case against Obama is that he didn't strut enough.

It's a tough case to make. For example, **John McCain tried to keep on message** in his speech to the RNC by repeating and over-using the words “leadership,” “leader,” “lead” and “led.” He went off message when his arguments led toward military intervention in Iran and Syria and a new belligerency toward Russia and China.

Condoleezza Rice also picked up the theme, **telling the convention** “one cannot lead from behind,” but failed to mention how the Bush administration's upfront leadership took us into the war in Iraq.

In his speech to the GOP convention, Romney took his cue from the Republican Party platform. He left his remarks on foreign policy to the end and made them brief. To be precise, 202 words.

Romney's remarks on foreign policy struck me as nostalgia for the Cold War. His toughest words went out to China and Russia. On his first day in the White House, Romney promises to condemn China for currency manipulation and impose tariffs on imports from China. Would the tariffs apply to the Chinese manufacturing companies in which Bain Capital invested? On Russia, he promises to stand up to Vladimir Putin and show “more backbone.” What does Romney have in mind? Is he going to demand that Putin free Pussy Riot?

To cap this neo-Cold War speech, Romney found time to criticize Obama for easing sanctions on

Cuba.

It was a bit odd that Romney's 202 words on foreign policy included criticism of the relaxation of travel restrictions to Cuba but made no mention of the war in Afghanistan or an elaboration of what he would do toward Iran, since he has rejected talking to Teheran.

Democrats' foreign policy card

Last night, the Democrats played their foreign policy card. John Kerry did the heavy lifting. He defined the Obama leadership style: "We have a president who has made America lead like America again." He also defined Romney as a neophyte on foreign policy who would "outsource" foreign policy to the discredited "neocons" of the Bush administration.

Joe Biden's role was to translate Obama's foreign policy into half of the tag line for a bumper sticker: "Osama bin Laden is dead, G.M. is alive."

In the president's speech, he eagerly took up the topic of foreign policy. He retired the slogan of "leading from behind" in favor of "leadership that has been tested and proven."

Obama's main challenge in discussing his opponents' record on foreign policy was to hold back on the punch lines and not come off as a Jon Stewart skit on Romney and Ryan. The president put it politely. His opponents, Romney and Ryan, are "new" to foreign policy, he said.

Nevertheless, he couldn't resist taking advantage of Romney's gaffe in London or his elevation of Russia to our "number one geo-political foe." (As the Russians would say, *mezhd u nami* – "just between us"-- Romney's exaggeration of Russia's threat was a welcome boost to Putin's image back in Moscow.)

Kerry had consigned the Romney/Ryan ticket to the dustbins of the Bush administration. Obama put them a bit further into the past. His opponents were in a "Cold War time warp."

Last night Obama indulged himself in taking credit for a string of successes – the assassination of Bin Laden, the devastation of Al-Qaeda, a promise kept on withdrawing from war in Iraq and one more to be fulfilled in Afghanistan, international sanctions on Iran. Yet, he was careful not to overreach. Foreign policy has a way of too often turning pride in success into hubris.

Pick an issue: Iran, Syria, the European crisis, another terrorist strike. Too much remains uncertain. Before the November election, glasses that today seem half full could suddenly seem half empty. My guess is that last night Obama had his say on foreign policy.

For the rest of the campaign, we will hear little more than "Osama bin Laden is dead, G.M. is alive."

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