

Romney vs. Obama: what the Atlantic Alliance can expect from the next U.S. President

by Patrick Keller¹

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I. Introduction

The American President is still the most influential actor in international affairs.² Despite the talk of American decline and the evidence of rising powers, despite the new complexities of globalization and the increased relevance of non-state actors, the U.S. President continues to play a special role. As head of the strongest of all national economies, commander in chief of the mightiest armed forces in the history of the world, and leader of the present-day democracy with the oldest constitution, his policies and his bearing shape international politics more than those of any other actor. It is thus understandable that not just the American people but also U.S. allies in NATO and the world at large follow the current presidential campaign with keen interest. Given that the United States is first among equals in the Alliance, strategists in NATO member states have a particular desire to discern the future President's stance on international security affairs because they will need to plan accordingly. However, in contrasting the positions of President Barack Obama and his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney, they encounter three basic problems.

The first is typical of all political campaigns and can be labeled the "Cuomo Problem". Former New York governor Mario Cuomo is credited with the quip that politicians campaign in poetry, but govern in prose. Indeed, speeches and promises on the campaign trail are hardly a reliable indicator of what a candidate will actually do once s/he has been elected to office. This applies not just to first-time candidates but also to those seeking re-election: his actions over the past four years give subtle hints at how Barack Obama might approach international security policy if granted another term, but they do not provide certainty.

The difference between campaign rhetoric and government policy must not



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necessarily be attributed to pandering or ignorance. Often it is forced upon the politician by an unforeseen crisis – think of George W. Bush, who campaigned against the idea of nation-building and then, after 9/11, led the U.S. into two of the most ambitious nation-building efforts ever seen. Thus, we need to take all the information about the candidates' positions with a grain of salt – it can contribute to an educated guess, but does not let us know the future.

The second problem is specific to the 2012 election: It is not about foreign policy at all. In a typical poll from February this year, 92% of voters said the candidates' position on "The Economy" was "extremely" or "very" important to their vote in the presidential election, making it the major issue.³ "The Economy" is followed by "Unemployment" (82%), "The Federal Budget Deficit" (79%), and "The Health Care Law Passed in 2010" (75%). "Terrorism and National Security" ranks only fifth (72%), and is the theme which shows the most significant gap between registered Democrats (67%) and Republicans (81%). More specific issues of foreign policy or security affairs do not even make the list, whereas other economy-related issues such as "Taxes" and "Gap between Rich and Poor" do. Given the unprecedented forty-plus consecutive months of more than 8% unemployment, the priorities of the U.S. voter come as no surprise.

Obama and Romney campaign accordingly, focusing on their respective ideas of how to strengthen the economy, reduce unemployment, and fix the debt crisis. They hardly talk about security policy, and they are not pressured to do so. Indeed, for a challenger like Romney, every day not spent talking about the incumbent's disastrous economic record can be viewed as a lost day. In turn, Obama cannot shift the attention to some of his foreign policy successes, because they seem comparatively irrelevant to most voters. (Also, some successes such as the death of Osama bin Laden are hard to sell to Obama's leftist core constituency.)

As a consequence, it is difficult to obtain a comprehensive

and nuanced picture of the candidates' foreign policy vision for the future. Whereas in 2008 specifics on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as on the general role of America in international affairs were part and parcel of every campaign stop, today one has to accumulate bits and pieces – and then read the tealeaves.

The third problem is complementary to the second and pertains to the inherent vagueness of much of the Mitt Romney campaign: even when he does make foreign affairs an issue, he is rarely specific in contrasting his approach with Obama's. As David Brooks, a conservative commentator for the *New York Times*, put it: "Mitt Romney has run the closest thing to a policy-free race as [sic] any candidate in my lifetime. Republicans spend their days fleshing out proposals, which Romney decides not to champion."⁴

This campaign season, Romney has given two major speeches dedicated solely to foreign and security policy. Both draw heavily on Romney's collection of foreign policy positions, to be found on his website under the headline "An American Century."⁵ In typical campaign fashion, the positions are long on rhetoric and short on specifics. Especially in the realm of foreign and security affairs, the Romney campaign seems to have much difficulty in developing a clear-cut contrast to the President – or is unwilling to do so as this could divert attention from the economy.

This leads some observers such as *Foreign Policy's* Aaron Miller to suggest that both candidates' positions on foreign affairs are indeed indistinguishable: "They are basically the same man."⁶ While this assessment might take things a bit too far, it is indeed true that both candidates reflect Washington's threefold foreign policy consensus in the post-George W. Bush era: first, get the American economic house in order; second, defeat imminent threats to American interests (e.g. by killing terrorists through drone strikes, or sabotaging the Iranian nuclear program with cyber attacks); third, end current wars as soon as possible, and avoid substantial new military engagements. On all of

³ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/153029/economy-paramount-issue-voters.aspx>

⁴ David Brooks, "Dullest Campaign Ever", *New York Times*, July 30, 2012. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/31/opinion/brooks-dullest-campaign-ever.html>)

⁵ Mitt Romney, "Remarks on U.S. Foreign Policy", October 7, 2011 at The Citadel, South Carolina. (<http://www.mittromney.com/blogs/mitts-view/2011/10/mitt-romney-delivers-remarks-us-foreign-policy>) (cited in subsequent references as: The Citadel).

Mitt Romney, "Address to The Veterans of Foreign Wars Conference", July 24, 2012, Reno, Nevada. (<http://foxnewsinsider.com/2012/07/24/transcript-mitt-romneys-remarks-at-vfw-national-convention/>) (cited in subsequent references as : Veterans).

Team Romney, "Fact Sheet: Mitt Romney's Strategy To Ensure An American Century". (<http://www.mittromney.com/blogs/mitts-view/2011/10/fact-sheet-mitt-romneys-strategy-ensure-american-century>) (cited in subsequent references as: Fact sheet). This is the succinct version of a more extensive White Paper: http://www.mittromney.com/sites/default/files/shared/AnAmericanCentury-WhitePaper_0.pdf

⁶ Aaron David Miller, "Barack O'Romney", *Foreign Policy*, May 23, 2012. (http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/05/23/barack_ormoney)



these basic propositions, Obama and Romney agree. Despite these problems, it is still worthwhile to have a closer look at the attitudes and ideas both candidates exhibit on international security issues (rather than the much broader topic of foreign affairs at large). There might be little to go on, especially in terms of distinguishing their approaches in practice, but an analysis of the speeches and writings of each candidate (as well as the stated positions of their advisers) will still yield some insights about what to expect from the next U.S. President. In proposing such an analysis, this paper will focus more on the views of Mitt Romney because he is, to quote Donald Rumsfeld out of context, the “known unknown”⁷: whereas President and Nobel Peace Laureate Barack Obama has had four years in office to demonstrate his take on security affairs, Romney is relatively new to the game. In the following analysis, Obama’s positions will therefore be used mostly as a foil to illustrate Romney’s views. The concluding assessment will then, hopefully, do equal justice to both candidates.

II. America’s Role in the World

The title of Mitt Romney’s position paper on foreign affairs, “An American Century”, alludes to Henry Luce’s famous statement on the emerging global hegemony of the United States in the 20th century. Indeed, Romney rejects the notion of inevitable U.S. decline; to him, “decline is a choice”.⁸ If the right policies are adopted, Romney argues, the U.S. will continue to be the leading world power. He therefore seeks to “restore the three foundations of American power: strong values, a strong economy, and a strong military.”⁹ Reading Romney, that seems to require little more than “resolve”, “clarity”, and “strength” – three nouns he uses repeatedly in describing his approach.

The idea of American strength and American leadership is crucial to Romney’s view of foreign affairs. He regards American preponderance as a boon not just to Ameri-

cans but to the world at large: “when America is strong, the world is safer”.¹⁰ Such a world order will also be beneficial to the advance of liberal values and prosperity. Thus, Romney describes himself as “an unapologetic believer in the greatness of America. I am not ashamed of American power. [...] I do not view America as just one more place on the strategic map, one more power to be balanced. I believe our country is the greatest force for good the world has ever known, and that our influence is needed as much now as ever.”¹¹ Romney, in other words, embraces the idea of America as “an exceptional country with a unique destiny and role in the world”.¹² In turn, he accuses Barack Obama of forfeiting that legacy and of diminishing U.S. leadership.

It is indeed a characteristic of President Obama’s foreign policy to avoid any sheen of nationalistic grandstanding. One example is his oft-quoted stance on exceptionalism: “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.”¹³ This can be interpreted as an effort to repair some of the diplomatic damage the Bush administration’s allegedly jingoistic foreign and security policy caused. But, more importantly, Obama’s downplaying of America’s exceptional role translates into restraint in using U.S. hard and soft power in international crises. For instance, Obama was reluctant to use force in Libya until he was pushed hard by British and French allies as well as by his own advisers. Similarly, Obama refuses to intervene in the Syrian civil war, whereas Romney advocates arming the rebels. And when Iranian protesters took to the streets of Tehran after the latest election scam, the American President hesitated to deliver even a message of lukewarm support and encouragement – for fear of being seen as meddling.

The difference between the two candidates’ views of America’s role in the world should not be exaggerated, however. It is quite plausible that Obama’s sober rhetoric and his downsizing of America’s role is a consequence of practical constraints rather than the expression of a fundamental philosophical difference. With the costly

⁷ Donald Rumsfeld, DoD News Briefing, February 12, 2002. (<http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636>).

⁸ Fact sheet.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Veterans.

¹² The Citadel.

¹³ President Obama, News Conference, April 4, 2009. (http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/News-Conference-By-President-Obama-4-04-2009/)

To be sure, Obama added that the U.S. constitution enshrined a core set of “exceptional” values and that America must continue to play an “extraordinary role in leading the world”. Still, it is a far cry from the full-throttle defense of American Exceptionalism as given by Romney.



and disappointing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq coming to an end, the severe economic downturn at home, and public opinion deeply skeptical of further foreign entanglements, Obama's re-interpretation of U.S. leadership in international security affairs might be the most prudent (and even the only viable) policy to pursue. As a candidate, free from the accountability of office, Mitt Romney can hammer on the tropes of national glory, world leadership, and moral responsibility. But, as we will see below, his grandiose rhetoric of strength and resolve by no means amounts to a change of actual policy.

Maybe the most interesting aspect of Romney's rhetoric about America's role in the world is how closely it follows – in substance and style – the recent writings of Robert Kagan. The publicist's latest book, "The World America Made", is a neoconservative cri du coeur against the prophets of decline and the advocates of reduced U.S. commitment abroad.¹⁴ In fact, Romney's campaign site lists Kagan as one of several "Special Advisers" on foreign policy and national security.¹⁵ Many of them, including Eliot Cohen, Eric Edelman, and Daniel Senor, are associated with neoconservative views. Most prominently, the campaign has used John Bolton, George W. Bush's controversial ambassador to the UN, as a surrogate.

Still, one cannot conclude that Romney aligns himself with neoconservative people and policies. His foreign policy team also features prominent realists such as Robert Zoellick, who is tipped to head the transition period on national security. The lack of hierarchy among the advisers – there is no leading foreign policy expert traveling with Romney and talking to the press – further blurs the contours of Romney's vision. And, most importantly, with frequent reports about the foreign policy team being "sidelined, scrambling to be heard in a campaign that seems solely focused on bashing Obama's economic record"¹⁶, it is unclear to what degree his advisers actually inform his views.

III. Allies & Partners

1) NATO

Mitt Romney has presented no specific plan for NATO's future. In fact, he hardly mentions the Alliance at all. Shortly before NATO's 2012 summit, however, he did publish an op-ed in the *Chicago Tribune* entitled: "Reinforcing Alliance's Military Might Is Vital".¹⁷ The piece hinges on two ideas: a successful Alliance requires U.S. leadership, and it also requires an increased effort among European member states to carry their own weight. He writes: "An alliance not undergirded by military strength and U.S. leadership may soon become an alliance in name only."¹⁸ In reading this article and Romney's speeches, one can sum up his views on NATO in five points.

First, territorial defense is no longer NATO's one overriding purpose. Upholding Western security interests in the 21st century also requires the projection of power and stability into distant theaters such as Afghanistan and Libya. The current domestic constraints (in economic and political terms) on such an extensive interpretation of security interests make it more difficult to act, but they do not change the basic rationale. In principle, Romney and Obama agree on this point.

Second, NATO can be effective only if the U.S. leads politically and militarily. Romney sharply criticizes Obama's approach to the Libya mission, sometimes described as "leading from behind".¹⁹ In Romney's view, the U.S. should not leave its European allies alone in dealing with crises in the European neighborhood. Since European member states in any case depend on U.S. military support, the U.S. should not shy away from the political lead either.

Third, in order to maintain the capabilities required for such a leadership role, Romney promises to "reverse Obama-era defense spending cuts and set a core defense spending floor of 4% of GDP"²⁰. Since current U.S. defense spending stands at about 4.8% of GDP, Rom-

¹⁴ Robert Kagan, *The World That America Made*, New York: Knopf 2012.

¹⁵ Overview of Romney's foreign policy and national security advisory team. (<http://www.mittromney.com/blogs/mitts-view/2011/10/mitt-romney-announces-foreign-policy-and-national-security-advisory-team>)

¹⁶ Eli Lake, "Romney's Foreign-Policy Team: Anyone Home?", *Daily Beast*, July 2, 2012. (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/07/02/romney-s-foreign-policy-team-anyone-home.html>)

¹⁷ Mitt Romney, "Reinforcing Alliance's Military Might Is Vital", *Chicago Tribune*, May 19, 2012. (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/07/02/romney-s-foreign-policy-team-anyone-home.html>)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ The quote first appeared in Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist", *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, where it is attributed to a White House staffer. (http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza) Obama himself has never used that phrase to describe his strategy.

²⁰ Fact sheet.



ney's demand (which he first made in the 2008 primaries) is surely aimed at prospective cuts in the coming years rather than at today's defense spending by the Obama administration.²¹

Fourth, Romney warns European allies that they must invest more in their military capabilities – or at least increase their current efficiency. He fully supports the dire warnings expressed by Obama's Defense Secretary Robert Gates in his valedictory address in Brussels, when he predicted that a two-tier alliance will be doomed as devoid of value for the United States.²² In a related concern, Romney – again like Obama and members of the current administration – is outspoken in his criticism of the way European Union countries handle the Euro crisis. In contrast to Obama, however, he does not call for greater stimulus programs of government spending but blames Europe's overblown social welfare systems for the crisis. In effect, Romney argues, Europeans outsource their defense to the U.S. while enjoying the comforts of their entitlement programs. For economic reasons and because of (un-)fairness in burden-sharing, this model seems no longer sustainable.

Fifth, Romney commits to the “on-time completion of a fully capable missile defense system in Eastern Europe”.²³ He criticizes Obama's withdrawal from the Bush administration's plans to station missile defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic as a kowtow to Russia at the cost of a “shabby”²⁴ treatment of allies and a “sudden abandonment of friends”.²⁵ Still, Romney supports the Obama administration's phased-adaptive approach, while insisting on quickly following through on all the phases, in order “to deter and defend against nuclear attacks on our homeland and our allies”.²⁶ He also “retains the option of reverting to President Bush's swifter plan if Iran is making faster progress on developing long range missiles or if new technologies on which the current plan relies fail to materialize in a timely fashion”.²⁷ Given the technical challenges of installing missile defenses, it seems costly and impractical to have it both ways and

pursue the Obama and the Bush models at the same time. But at least on one aspect of the system, Romney is unequivocal: he “will deny Russia any control or veto over the system”.²⁸

2) Israel

On foreign policy, the most tangible difference between Obama and Romney is in their stance vis-à-vis Israel, and especially the Arab-Israeli conflict. Obama got off on the wrong foot during the 2008 campaign when he sent mixed signals on Jerusalem's status as an undivided city. He compounded Israeli irritation early in his term when he pressured the Netanyahu government to stop settlement activity in both the West Bank and East Jerusalem – as a precondition for resuming peace talks. Obama had to reverse himself, but his relationship with Netanyahu has been destroyed, as has been any hope for meaningful peace talks under the current leadership of the three parties.

In comparison, Romney is a much more traditional friend of Israel: “The chorus of accusations, threats, and insults at the United Nations [directed towards Israel] should never again include the voice of the President of the United States.”²⁹ Romney is unlikely to follow Obama's attempt at pressuring the Israeli government into negotiations with the Palestinians. Romney is convinced that there will be no peace until Palestinians and Israelis seek rapprochement of their own accord. Then, and only then, the U.S. could support the process. Romney is willing, however, to put more pressure on the Palestinians should they fail to show good will. As stated in his campaign fact sheet, a President Romney “will make clear to the Palestinians that the unilateral attempt to decide issues that are designated for final negotiations is unacceptable. The United States will reduce assistance to the Palestinians if they continue to pursue United Nations recognition or form a unity government that includes Hamas, a terrorist group dedicated to Israel's destruction.”³⁰

²¹ World Bank data on defense spending. (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS/countries>) For Romney's position in the 2008 primaries, see Mitt Romney, “Rising to a New Generation of Global Challenges”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2007

²² Robert Gates, “The Security and Defense Agenda (Future of NATO)”, June 10, 2011, Brussels, Belgium. (<http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1581>)

²³ Fact sheet.

²⁴ Romney, “Reinforcing”.

²⁵ Veterans

²⁶ Fact sheet.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Veterans



To be sure, it was the Obama administration that threatened to veto the Palestinian bid for statehood at the UN, thus derailing the move towards statehood. Obama and Romney agree on other basic principles, such as that Israel's security is a vital national interest of the United States and that there should be negotiations leading to a two-state solution. Still, the candidates differ in style, with Romney appearing more dedicated in his support of Israel. This is again evident in his rhetoric regarding the threat to Israel's survival posed by Iran's nuclear program, which is discussed in the next section.

IV. Threats & Challenges

In his 2010 book, "No Apology: The Case for American Greatness", Mitt Romney identified three major threats to U.S. interests and security: the rise of China's military; the expansion of Russian influence, particularly in the former Soviet Republics; and the global Jihadist movement.³¹ Over the course of the campaign, he has also included Iran's nuclear weapons program in that list: "There is no greater danger in the world today than the prospect of the ayatollahs in Tehran possessing nuclear weapons capability."³²

1) Iran

Mitt Romney, just like Presidents Obama and George W. Bush before him, is on record as saying that it is "unacceptable"³³ for Iran to possess a nuclear weapon. And, just like Obama and Bush, he does not rule out military action if all else fails to prevent that acquisition. But Romney doubts whether the Obama administration would actually follow through. As he said in a TV debate in November 2011: "If we re-elect Barack Obama, Iran will have a nuclear weapon. If you elect me as president, Iran will not have a nuclear weapon."³⁴

It is unclear, however, what exactly Romney would do differently from Obama. His campaign sheet enumerates several measures – ranging from "tougher sanctions" and

increasing the presence of the U.S. fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf – but stops short of advocating military strikes or declaring support for Israeli action.³⁵ Given that the Obama administration has sharpened the sanctions regime and has stepped up covert action against the nuclear program, Romney's propositions do not amount to a deviation from the current course. Judging from their pronouncements it seems unlikely that either candidate would support an arrangement based on deterring a nuclear Iran, including a "virtually" nuclear Iran within immediate reach of break-out capability. In other words, should the sanctions and other measures fail to alter the current policy of the Iranian regime, a military conflict is the probable scenario.

2) China

Mitt Romney's tough rhetoric on China again exceeds the specificity of his proposals. He accuses China of currency manipulation and copyright violations, and calls for trade sanctions in response. How to actually implement those and how to deal with the effects – on the American economy and the political relationship with China – remains an open question.

On security issues vis-à-vis China, Romney's statements follow the lines of the arguments presented by his adviser Aaron Friedberg, a Princeton professor and former national security official on the staff of Vice President Richard Cheney. Friedberg argues for a strategy of "con-gagement", a mixture of containment and engagement.³⁶ While engagement between the two major powers is an economic necessity, the U.S. must also be careful to draw certain red lines so as to prevent the rise of China from destabilizing the region. That includes increased U.S. military presence in Asia Pacific, and the reassurance of friends and allies in the region that the U.S. will balance potential Chinese assertiveness. As a consequence, for example, Romney promises to sell more arms to Taiwan. Thus, Mitt Romney is in favor of Barack Obama's "Asia pivot", the increased focus on the region, also in terms of military strategy. But he criticizes the President's policy

³⁰ Fact Sheet.

³¹ Mitt Romney, *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness*, New York: St. Martin's Press 2010.

³² Veterans.

³³ Fact sheet.

³⁴ David E. Sanger, "Is There a Romney Doctrine?", *New York Times*, May 12, 2012. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/13/sunday-review/is-there-a-romney-doctrine.html?pagewanted=all>)

³⁵ Fact sheet.

³⁶ See Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, New York: W.W. Norton 2011 and Aaron L. Friedberg, "Bucking Beijing", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2012.



as too timid and ties that criticism to his general stance on defense spending: “President Obama has set us on course toward a hollow force”³⁷ and “an inferior American Navy in the Pacific”.³⁸ Romney promises an increase in the naval shipbuilding rate from nine to fifteen vessels per year within his first hundred days as President, in order to balance China’s military growth and maintain open sea lanes for international trade.³⁹

3) Russia

On Russia, Mitt Romney has produced some of his most memorable campaign statements. In a TV interview, Romney said: “Russia [...] is, without question, our number one geopolitical foe.”⁴⁰ And in his campaign sheet, Romney promises to “reset President Obama’s ‘Reset with Russia’”.⁴¹ Both statements encapsulate Romney’s belief that, in international security affairs, Russia is less of a partner to the U.S. than an antagonist. In support of this view, he cites Russia’s unwillingness to allow for a strict UN resolution against the Assad regime in Syria and its at best reluctant support of sanctions against Iran. Romney regards Obama’s “Reset” policy of engaging Russia as an equal power as dangerously misguided – as with the Iranian regime, Romney argues, Russian leaders have only used that overture to push their own interests without reciprocating.

The one area where this attitude might lead to an actual change in policy is arms control. Romney has always opposed the New START agreement and even published an op-ed advising against Senate ratification.⁴² Accordingly, he promises to review the implementation of the treaty if elected President. In addition, he seeks to strengthen European allies’ independence of Russian energy, for instance by increasing technical assistance to the Nabucco pipeline. He also plans to develop closer ties to the post-Soviet countries in Central Asia through trade pacts and educational exchanges. Finally, as mentioned above, he intends to push for a NATO missile defense system regardless of Russian reservations.

Despite the difference in tone, most of these ideas, with

the exception of (nuclear) arms control and disarmament issues, do not differ much from the policies pursued by the Obama administration. In dealing with the so-called difficult partners in the world, including Russia, it could even be argued that Obama has quickly abandoned his charm offensive of unilateral concessions and accepted the sobering reality of quid pro quo foreign policy pragmatism.

4) Jihadist Terror

Jihadist terrorists, failed or failing states harboring them, and states actively sponsoring them (and possibly providing them with weapons of mass destruction): such is the nexus which Mitt Romney, in the tradition of George W. Bush, identifies as a primary threat not just to the security of the U.S. and the West, but also to moderate Islamic countries and the fruits of the Arab Spring. At the same time, given the political and financial constraints at home, Romney would seek to fight those terrorists through drone strikes or covert operations, not by invading other countries. Since Barack Obama has pursued exactly such a policy, even increased the number of drone strikes against terrorists in Pakistan/Afghanistan, there is little room for Romney to distinguish himself from the President on this issue. Ordering the operation that led to the death of Osama bin Laden has further strengthened Obama’s credentials in the fight against terrorism. His decision to maintain Guantanamo Prison (or, rather, his inability to close it) has had a similar effect. Usually a rewarding issue for Republican candidates seeking to sharpen their profile, fighting terrorism is thus a truly bipartisan effort this election cycle.

On the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan too, Romney does not offer a viable alternative to Obama. While a supporter of both the war and the surge, Romney was also in favor of withdrawing from Iraq this year. If elected, he will review the security situation, but it seems unlikely that he will or can decide to deploy a significant amount of troops back into the country.

Similarly, Romney cautioned against hasty withdrawal

³⁷ Fact sheet.

³⁸ The Citadel

³⁹ See Fact sheet.

⁴⁰ Wolf Blitzer interview with Mitt Romney, CNN, 26 March 26 2012. (<http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2012/03/26/romney-russia-is-our-number-one-geopolitical-foe/>)

⁴¹ Fact sheet.

⁴² Mitt Romney, “Obama’s Worst Foreign-Policy Mistake”, Washington Post, July 6, 2010. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/05/AR2010070502657.html>)



from Afghanistan and criticized Obama for seeking a negotiated solution with the Taliban: “We should not negotiate with the Taliban. We should defeat the Taliban. We go anywhere they are and we kill them.”⁴³ Nonetheless, Romney has embraced NATO’s plan to withdraw all fighting forces by the end of 2014, and offers no original idea on Afghanistan or Pakistan policy in his campaign publications. As with other security issues, Romney seems to aim for an image of being the “tougher” of the two contenders, but fails to bolster that claim with specific policy recommendations. This is evident also in Romney’s almost desperate attempts to talk up the danger posed by Cuba and Venezuela to U.S. interests.⁴⁴ It thus seems safe to dismiss his rhetoric as campaign blustering rather than a guideline for a change in policy.

V. Conclusion

So what kind of security policy can NATO and the world expect from the next U.S. President? In summing up the above comparison of Mitt Romney’s and Barack Obama’s positions, five conclusions stand out.

First, it is reasonable to expect much more continuity than change in U.S. foreign and security policy when the next President is sworn in next January. Both candidates may differ in their basic outlook – Barack Obama is a traditional liberal internationalist, while Mitt Romney seems like a blend of nationalist, realist, and neoconservative principles – but in their actual policy suggestions they are remarkably similar. This November, American voters can choose between two starkly different philosophies on the role of the state and on economic and fiscal policy; but they are not being offered two distinct platforms on foreign affairs.

Second, absent a wild card event on the scale of another 9/11, the next President’s foreign and security policy will be strongly constrained by domestic concerns. “Austerity” and “war-weariness” are the key phenomena restricting the President’s freedom of action in international affairs. This will apply to both men equally, thus further increasing their similarity in this field.

Third, if a Romney presidency were to bring any tangible change at all in security policy, it would most likely consist of an increase (or at least no further cuts) in defense

spending and a more obvious hard line, mostly in rhetoric, towards difficult partners and states of concern such as Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. Just as Obama sought to distance himself from what he perceived as the unilateralism and arrogance of the Bush years, there is the prospect of Romney seeking to distance himself from Obama’s “leading from behind”. As a consequence, Romney’s “leading from the front”, most likely in the form of brusque statements, might provoke some irritation among partners and opponents alike, especially early in his term.

Fourth, there is also a chance that a second Obama administration might bring some change in comparison to the first four years in office. Unburdened of the worries of re-election, with his eye on his place in the history books, and tied down in the domestic arena by a Republican House and (quite possibly) Senate, Obama could turn to foreign affairs to expand his legacy. It is not hard to imagine that he might return to his more idealistic beginnings and pursue an agenda of, for example, global zero on nuclear weapons, talking to dictators without preconditions, or increased pressure on Israel to reach a settlement with the Palestinians. Granted, this is all speculation, but it would not be unusual for a second-term President to focus on foreign affairs and to be willing to take more risks than before.

Fifth, while neither candidate is isolationist, both Obama and Romney are only reluctant transatlanticists. In his four years in office, Obama has made it clear that he is a “citizen of the world”⁴⁵ rather than a traditional transatlanticist. His recent decision to focus U.S. diplomatic, economic, and military strategy on the Asia Pacific region has put additional emphasis on this shift in U.S. priorities. As a Mormon missionary, Romney has spent two years in France, but that does not make him sympathetic to “Old Europe”. As his campaign trip to Great Britain, Poland, and Israel illustrates, he values traditional allies and bilateral relationships – but with a distinct skew towards the reliable friends of America in the era of George W. Bush. So, while a majority of Europeans is disappointed in Obama and the neglect he has shown towards the transatlantic relationship, they also seem comfortable with that relationship adrift in a haze. With Romney, Europeans might be in for some tough love – and, certainly, constant lecturing about their defense budgets.

⁴³ Singer, “Romney Doctrine”.

⁴⁴ The Citadel.

⁴⁵ Barack Obama, “A World that Stands as One”, July 24, 2008, in Berlin, Germany. (<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/obama-s-berlin-speech-a-world-that-stands-as-one-a-567920.html>)