

The President and Challenger Tangle on Foreign Policy
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We have just had a debate between President Obama and Governor Romney on Foreign Policy. Since only about 10 percent of the public understands or even cares about foreign policy, it is difficult to assess how this will affect the election. But since I am a foreign policy wonk, I do care.

When President Obama had his first security briefing when he was sworn into office, his hair began to turn to gray. Presidents learn things then that they really couldn't know while they were campaigning. For example, Mr. Obama had wanted to close the Guantanamo prison holding some of the worst of the worst terrorists and move the trials to civilian courts. He tried but there were so many howls from American communities that did not want those trials held in their towns and so many issues about civilian trials for terrorists who had experienced enhanced interrogation (torture ordered by the previous administration) that closing Guantanamo became impossible. Where else could he put such people?

He came into office believing (as did so many liberals in Europe and the United States) that terrorists should be considered criminals, not enemy combatants. He soon found that behind the terrorists were state actors (and Muslim money) and that Islamist terrorism had become an international declaration of war. This is not merely a criminal enterprise, like the Mafia.

Whether candidates for office know it or not, foreign policy must have a certain continuity from president to president. Changes to these policies are gradual and fraught with many unknowns. Our relationships with other nations around the world depend upon continuity of principles and the trust that comes with them---until a game changer arises.

During the Cold War, both we and the Russians had repugnant allies. We supported thuggish dictatorships without ideologies while the Russians supported mind-controlling thugs who were willing to try Communism. We also supported otherwise obnoxious religious factions against Soviet Communists, ignoring that the religious factions would become our next, and far worse, enemy. (Think of Iran, Afghanistan Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan.)

Now the old Cold War political scene has changed. The authoritarian dictators who kept the peace for so long are being pushed out. They were our allies, but we cannot continue to support their excesses without looking like hypocrites, particularly because our policy is to sell democracy. Their replacements, however, don't look like good fellows to me. They are new dictatorships in the making---this time looking more like Iran's Islamic Revolution than the early democracies that replaced the Soviet Union.

If we lend military assistance to dissidents in Syria, for example, and they succeed in overturning a powerful dictatorship, we don't know who will lead the next government. President Obama has resisted overtly helping the resistance for that very reason. We suspect (rightly) that we would not like the outcome. So far, the Muslim Spring outcomes have been horrible. A president who is moved by his passion for the underdog, a position taken at the moment by Governor Romney and former challenger, Senator McCain, who think that we can lean on the world as we once did, is doomed to failure.

Allies change over time too. Good old reliable Turkey, a charter member of NATO, is no longer what it was. Their government is increasingly Islamist, and this was something foreseen by the Europeans who did not want Turkey in the EU. They were right. Now we see Turkey and Syria teetering on open combat and as a NATO member, we might be obliged to jump in.

It is folly to get ourselves into a position where we must use military force. The public won't have it! Two wars were two too many for the past decade or more, and we should not be wasting our military might on a dubious goal. Nothing we do can change the totalitarian Middle East into democracies that we would like. But we have many other arrows in our quiver and we are using them.

Foreign policy is not for amateurs.

672 words

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