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Counterstrike II: Answering Conservative Charges on National Security

By Mieke Eoyang, Aki Peritz, Julie Zelnick, and Brett McCrae

On Monday, President Obama and Governor Romney will face off in a debate on foreign policy, an issue which has become increasingly important in the campaign.

On many national security challenges, Romney seems to agree with the Administration. These include: ending the war in Iraq, maintaining the U.S. relationship with Pakistan, and using of drones and special operations forces to battle al Qaeda. While the Governor may quibble with the President's handling of those issues or seek to draw distinctions between their two approaches, there appears to be substantial agreement on those points.

But in a number of other areas, there are substantive disagreements between the President and his challenger. This memo lays out the major charges that Romney is likely to level against the President during Monday's debate, along with proposed responses, the facts to back them up, and a counter-charge.

The third presidential debate topics will be:*

- The Changing Middle East and the New Face of Terrorism
- Our Longest War—Afghanistan and Pakistan
- Red Lines—Israel and Iran
- The Rise of China and Tomorrow's World
- America's Role in the World

The Changing Middle East and the New Face of Terrorism

TERRORISM



President Obama brags about past victories against terrorists, but he has failed to address the "ongoing, escalating global conflict with radical Islamist groups."¹



The President is **aggressively targeting al Qaeda** franchises in Yemen, Somalia, Northern Africa and elsewhere, and has decimated al Qaeda's core leadership.² He has a proven track record of bringing killers to justice.

* Selected and announced by debate moderator Bob Schieffer.

LIBYA



The Obama Administration tried to hide the fact that the attack in Benghazi that killed Ambassador Stevens was the work of terrorists operating in Libya, claiming that it was a spontaneous event inspired by a video.



The President has **sworn to hunt down the killers** and get to the bottom of what happened.³ As the second presidential debate moderator confirmed, the President called it an “act of terror” shortly after the attack.⁴ In fact, the Romney campaign’s reckless accusations display a worrying lack of understanding about both the facts in Benghazi and the broader intelligence process.

- In the October 16 debate, President Obama said “as soon as we found out that the Benghazi consulate was being overrun, I was on the phone with my national security team, and I gave them three instructions”—beef up our security, investigate what happened, and hunt them down.⁵
- The Intelligence Community issued a statement saying that the information about the attack had been evolving in the days immediately following the event,⁶ which is perfectly consistent with how intelligence is gathered in a crisis.⁷

SYRIA



President Obama has failed to stop Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s brutal repression of his people. Governor Romney would “work with our partners to identify and organize those members of the opposition who share our values and then ensure they obtain the arms they need to defeat Assad’s tanks, helicopters and fighter jets.”⁸



The President has been crystal clear, saying that **Assad must go.**⁹ But America should be wary of jumping into a civil war in the Middle East, especially when we can’t tell our friends from our foes. If Romney wants to send heavy weapons to the rebels, then how would he prevent them from falling into the hands of extremists, which would endanger our allies in the region?

- The U.S. military has found that there are more than 100 separate anti-government groups in Syria,¹⁰ and The New York Times has reported that the arms that are flowing to the rebels are falling mainly into the hands of al Qaeda-linked jihadists.¹¹
- There is no coalition of the willing to stop the bloodshed in Syria. The Arab League does not support a forceful intervention or arming the Syrian rebels.¹² Furthermore, the UN Security Council is hamstrung because China and Russia are unwilling to authorize direct intervention in the country.
- Turkey, a NATO ally, is sheltering over 100,000 Syrian refugees, and tensions are increasing across the border. In addition to cross-border shelling, the Syrians have shot down a Turkish plane,¹³ while Turkey intercepted a plane which it claims carried Russian arms to Syria.¹⁴

LEADERSHIP IN THE MIDDLE EAST



President Obama has “failed to lead,” is “leaving American destiny at the mercy of events” in the Middle East, and started his administration with “an apology tour.”¹⁵



The President has **demonstrated strong and effective leadership** on the world stage, gaining international support to address challenges in the region. President Obama has never apologized for American interests or values, and the charge that he has done so is flat-out wrong.¹⁶

- President Obama began restoring America’s reputation and leadership on the world stage. Before he took office in 2009, global views of the U.S. had plummeted from post-9/11 highs to record lows.¹⁷ President Obama’s term has restored positive views of America, which have remained significantly higher than those of the Bush era.¹⁸
- President Obama has never apologized for America. The Washington Post’s Fact Checker column found “the apology tour never happened,” awarding the false charge four Pinocchios.¹⁹

Our Longest War—Afghanistan and Pakistan

AFGHANISTAN

The United States is set to transition combat responsibilities for Afghanistan back to local forces by 2014.²⁰



The President is making a “politically timed retreat that abandons the Afghan people to the same extremists who ravaged their country and used it to launch the attacks of 9/11.”²¹ Romney will consult with the commanders on the ground about timing our withdrawal.



President Obama is on course to **responsibly end the war in Afghanistan**, as he did in Iraq. Afghans already provide security for 75% of their own people, and they will take over completely by 2014.²² Governor Romney doesn’t have one position on Afghanistan, he has all of them—the question is: where does he stand today?

- In May 2012, Presidents Obama and Karzai signed the Strategic Partnership Agreement which provides the U.S. the option to combat al Qaeda and its affiliates in the region from Afghanistan’s bases through 2024.²³
- This agreement allows the U.S. to continue using Special Operations Forces to track and eliminate threats from al Qaeda and other terrorist groups.²⁴

PAKISTAN

The two candidates largely agree on America's Pakistan policy. President Obama has built up America's credibility by successfully negotiating with Pakistan to reopen supply lines critical to the NATO war effort in Afghanistan. Obama has also conducted an aggressive drone campaign in the tribal areas of Pakistan, with the tacit cooperation of Pakistani officials.²⁵ This campaign has decimated the ranks of senior al Qaeda leaders and degraded the terrorist network's brain trust and operational capacity.

Red Lines—Israel and Iran

IRAN



Iran's ongoing nuclear program is the Obama administration's "greatest failing," and President Obama "did not do what was necessary to get Iran to be dissuaded from their nuclear folly."²⁶



President Obama has **done everything to stop the Iranian nuclear program, short of war**. He has implemented the toughest sanctions in history on the Iranian regime, and he has rallied our allies to do the same, which have pushed the Iranian economy into a tailspin. He has also made clear that all options remain on the table—including military strikes. But if Governor Romney thinks we should *already* be at war with Iran, he should make that clear to the American people.

- The bipartisan sanctions imposed by the President and Congress included a measure in 2010 that targeted the Iranian oil industry, one in 2011 that targeted the Central Bank of Iran, and a third this year that barred additional business sectors from dealing with the regime.²⁷
- This approach has allowed our allies, like the European Union, to add their own significant economic sanctions, which they announced just last week.²⁸
- According to an Israeli Finance Ministry report, the sanctions are having the intended destabilizing effect on the Iranian regime. The report says, "Iranians are blaming their government for rising prices...caused by Western sanctions against Iran's oil industry and central bank...There is more and more domestic resentment there."²⁹ The rial has lost 80% of its value since last year.³⁰

ISRAEL



Under President Obama, the U.S. has abandoned Israel, one of our most important allies in the Middle East.³¹



President Obama has **increased security cooperation with Israel to historic highs**. The Israeli Defense Minister recently said President Obama is doing more for Israeli security “than anything that I can remember in the past.”³² Why is Governor Romney trying to drive a wedge between the U.S. and Israel at this critical time?

- Obama has provided \$3 billion in annual security assistance to Israel as part of a 10-year, \$30 billion security commitment. In addition, the administration has provided \$205 million for the Iron Dome missile defense system.³³
- Despite a reportedly cool relationship, Obama has met one-on-one with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu more than any other foreign leader.³⁴ Both men agree that a nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable, with Netanyahu saying on September 28th, “I very much appreciate the president’s position, as does everyone in my country.”³⁵

The Rise of China and Tomorrow’s World

Both candidates seem to agree on the Obama administration’s ‘security pivot’ toward Asia, with more military resources being positioned in the Pacific Rim. Where they differ is over economic relations with China.

CHINA TRADE



The Obama administration has been soft on China’s unfair trading practices, which has hurt American businesses. Romney would label China a currency manipulator on “Day One.”³⁶



Obama is tough on China, especially on economic issues. His Administration has filed WTO trade cases against China at twice the rate of his predecessor.³⁷ If elected, Romney’s reckless stance towards China would ignite a trade war with our second largest trading partner.

- Obama’s administration imposed tariffs of up to 35% on Chinese-made tires in 2009.³⁸
- The White House has filed WTO cases against China in such key sectors such as financial services, raw materials, steel, and poultry.³⁹
- The Obama administration has challenged the Chinese in the WTO over import duties on American-made automobiles—duties that currently affect \$3.3 billion in exports.⁴⁰
- Leading Republicans, including former Secretary of State James Baker, have criticized Romney’s stance to label China a currency manipulator.⁴¹

America's Role in the World

LEADERSHIP ROLE



The Obama Administration has been “leading from behind” rather than asserting American leadership as the sole remaining superpower.⁴²



President Obama **knows how to be effective** instead of recklessly wading into conflicts. We had eight years of bluster that led us into a catastrophic, unnecessary war. Romney's rhetoric sounds familiar, which is not surprising since his foreign policy advisors are largely drawn from the Bush administration.

MILITARY SPENDING



If the President is re-elected you'll see dramatic cuts to our military. The Secretary of Defense has said these would be devastating.⁴³



President Obama **established a strategy and then funded it**, not the other way around. Top military advisors confirmed that this spending level will keep American and its interests safe.⁴⁴ Romney would waste trillions of tax dollars on things the military hasn't requested and does not want.

- Romney has vowed to peg defense spending at 4% of GDP, which would mean at least a \$2 trillion increase (based on estimated population growth) over the next decade.⁴⁵
- President Obama asked for \$613.9 billion for FY13, which is \$31.8 billion lower than the year before. This reduction is mainly due to the drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan. The DOD budget will continue to grow over the next 10 years, just at a slower rate because two major combat operations are ending.⁴⁶
- Romney has also stated his desire to add 100,000 more troops to U.S. ground forces, even though our ground wars are coming to a close. This would add at least \$15.8 billion to current defense spending projections.⁴⁷

Conclusion

President Obama has the strongest record of any Democrat since FDR on national security issues. He has ended the war in Iraq as promised, and he is ending the war in Afghanistan. He ordered the raid that killed Osama bin Laden and has decimated al Qaeda central. He has maintained a presence in the Middle East while rebalancing forces towards Asia. And he has done so with a plan that reduces defense spending responsibly. **President Obama has been tested over the last four years and he has proven himself to be a capable and effective Commander-in-Chief.**

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