

How to Make U.S. Foreign Policy Smarter

By [Andrew Hammond](#)

September 17, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

For U.S. voters, the state of the country's economy has traditionally been a more important election issue than foreign policy. In the past week, however, the tragic murder of a U.S. ambassador and three other Americans in Benghazi, Libya, has placed foreign policy in a more prominent position in the campaign.

More than a decade after 9/11, a critical mass of the electorate believes the United States should adopt a more cautious foreign policy, with the possible exception of Iran. Some polls show significant public support for efforts to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons, even if that necessitates U.S. military action.

Iran is just one of the issues on which Republican candidate Mitt Romney has articulated a more assertive posture than President Barack Obama. Another example is Russia, which Romney declared Washington's "No. 1 geopolitical foe."

Given the apparent differences between the two candidates, many international audiences are showing a keen interest in the election outcome. As in 2008, most of the world would like

to see Obama come out ahead in the November vote.

Nonetheless, there has been a marked decline in international approval of Obama's policies since he took office. Despite Romney's repeated accusations that Obama is weak in foreign policy, global critics of Obama point to his use of hard power, such as drone attacks on suspected terrorists.

According to a recent Pew poll, support in China for Obama's policies had dropped 30 percentage points, from 57 percent in 2009 to 27 percent in 2012. In Britain, France, Germany, Spain and Poland, the average reduction in support over the same period is 15 percentage points. In Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan and Turkey, the average decline in Obama's popularity is 19 percentage points.

These numbers would probably fall further if Romney wins in November and follows through on his assertive foreign policy rhetoric. A key question is whether Obama and Romney should care about what the rest of the world thinks. After all, no foreign citizens will vote in November.

The answer, of course, is yes. Some in the United States dismiss the importance of international opinion, but such short-sightedness neglects the crucial role it can play in facilitating foreign policy cooperation and information-sharing.

Many of the diverse foreign policy challenges facing the United States today require extensive global cooperation among leading nations, including Russia, other members of the United Nations Security Council and other regional powers. This cooperation can be facilitated by a U.S. foreign policy that displays a combination of soft power, including diplomacy that generates admiration rather than antagonism, and the prudent use of hard power, when absolutely required.

Combining hard and soft power more effectively, in what has been called "smart power," was something previous generations of U.S. policymakers well understood. For instance, Washington skillfully used both of these powers after World War II to cultivate support for a system of alliances and institutions that subsequently became a cornerstone of Western success in the second half of the century.

Today's world is clearly different from the Cold War era, but the need for smart power has never been more important.

Given the mood of the U.S. electorate, the development of a smart-power strategy will not win many votes for Obama or Romney in November. Nonetheless, this should be a pressing concern for both candidates if they are to fulfill their similar pledges to renew the country's world leadership for a new generation.

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