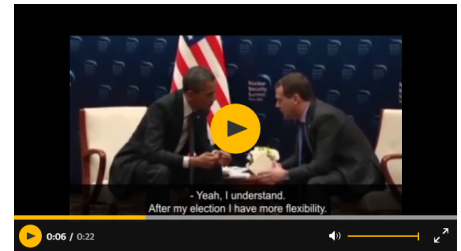


Obama caught on mic telling Medvedev to give US 'space' on nuclear issue

Mitt Romney describes as 'troubling' comments made to Russian PM that were picked up by microphone at summit in Seoul

Ewen MacAskill in Washington

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Republican leaders have jumped on Barack Obama after the president made unguarded comments to Russian leader Dmitry Medvedev, appealing to him to allow Obama space on the contentious European missile defence issue - and claiming he could be more flexible after the November general election.

Obama's comments were caught on a microphone during what the two leaders believed was a private conversation during a nuclear summit in South Korea.

Within minutes, rightwing blogs in America were full of accusations that Obama's comments offered fresh evidence of weakness, of kowtowing again to foreign governments. Others claimed his comments provided a glimpse of what Obama planned if he wins the general election: a much more radical second term.

Mitt Romney, almost certain to be Obama's Republican opponent in the general election, quickly sought to exploit the gaffe, describing it as "an alarming and troubling development".

In an earlier statement, Romney said: "President Obama signalled that he's going to cave to Russia on missile defence, but the American people have a right to know where else he plans to be 'flexible' in a second term."

In the comments caught by the mic, Obama urged Medvedev to tell incoming Russian president Vladimir Putin to give him time: "On all these issues, but particularly missile defence, this, this can be solved - but it's important for him to give me space."

Medvedev replied: "Yeah, I understand. I understand your message about space. Space for you."

Obama then elaborated: "This is my last election. After my election I have more flexibility."

Medvedev responded: "I understand. I will transmit this information to Vladimir."

It is the second time in six months that Obama has been caught unawares on microphone. In November, he was caught with the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, criticising the Israeli prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu.

The White House, responding to reporters about the exchanges with Medvedev, acknowledged the reality that progress on the missile issue - which Russia claims is aimed at itself but which the US

contends is to protect Europe from Iran - is unlikely in an election year.

Ben Rhodes, the White House deputy national security adviser, said: "Since 2012 is an election year in both countries, with an election and leadership transition in Russia and an election in the United States, it is clearly not a year in which we are going to achieve a breakthrough."

Romney, in a tweet, proposed a game in which people could predict other issues on which Obama might be flexible in a second term. "Fill in the blank. @BarackObama: I'll have more flexibility to ____ after the election. #ObamaFlexibility."

Such a strategy could be risky for Romney, with memories still fresh of last week's 'Etch a Sketch' gaffe by his campaign spokesman Eric Fehrnstrom. Fehrnstrom said Romney's campaign was like an Etch A Sketch, which was interpreted by many as Romney being ready to adopt different policies in the White House race from those he espouses in the Republican race.

The Republican chairman of the House armed services committee, Mike Turner, issued a statement asking the White House to clarify the president's remarks to Medvedev.

"Congress has made exquisitely clear to your administration and to other nations that it will block all attempts to weaken US missile defences," Turner said.

Conservative pundit Jennifer Rubin of the Washington Post, wrote: "It's remarkable, actually, that Obama could be any more flexible with Russia after the election than he's already been under the 'reset' that is indistinguishable from appeasement."

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