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See highlight for what is frame of where Jake/PIR are coming from.

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Hillary Clinton: President Obama's foreign policy 'shield'

By: Edward-Isaac Dovere

July 27, 2012 04:38 AM EDT

Mitt Romney is headed to Israel on Sunday — but Hillary Clinton got there first.

That's a common pattern as the Republican candidate tries to refocus the presidential campaign around foreign policy with his weeklong overseas trip: The international record that the secretary of state has built for President Barack Obama, and her travel schedule along the way, help him block and parry the Romney attacks.

Of course, there are limitations. As secretary of state, Clinton is barred from taking an active political role in the campaign. And the two days she spent in Jerusalem this month on her most recent trip haven't erased any of the complaints about Obama's failure to make his own trip there since taking office.

(PHOTOS: Hillary Clinton's world travels, 2009-2012)

Democratic and many independent voters still have an unmatched, visceral connection to her — unlike any other modern secretary of state. She's the best-known member of the administration, and her high 60s approval ratings put her far ahead of Obama and make her the most popular political figure in the country.

Though Obama praised her Thursday at a Cabinet meeting for "logging more miles than any secretary of state in history, dealing with a whole range of problems and opportunities around the globe," his campaign doesn't mention her. But it doesn't have to — Republican and Democratic strategists agree that Obama's chief ambassador abroad is inherently also the best ambassador for promoting the foreign achievements back home.

"She's widely recognized by a very high percentage of persuadable voters for having done a terrific job as secretary of state," Democratic consultant Steve Murphy said. "Having Hillary Clinton as part of the equation certainly strengthens Barack Obama's argument on foreign policy and national security."

Polling consistently shows Obama ahead on foreign policy — according to recent numbers from The New York Times and Gallup, that's the only part of the presidential portfolio where he consistently has a strong lead over Romney.

Clinton's accomplishments and star power limit Romney's avenues to attack, said Steve Schmidt, who served as the top strategist for John McCain's 2008 campaign.

"She provides a big shield for the president on any number of these issues," Schmidt said. "Any time you can lay claim to one of the most popular people in the country and one of the most admired people in the country, then it's a benefit for you."

Take the most recent trip this month: Clinton started in Kabul to address the continuing U.S. withdrawal there — a key part of the record Obama is campaigning on. Romney has repeatedly accused Obama of being soft on China, but Clinton took a moment during a speech in Mongolia to knock the "shortsighted and ultimately unsustainable bargain" of "economic liberalization without political liberalization." Then, just before Israel, Clinton stopped in Egypt, where Obama faces a situation complicated by the remnants of the Arab Spring and a new president from the Muslim Brotherhood. Clinton made clear that the U.S. isn't going to do anything to force Israel into negotiations. Then she went to Jerusalem to talk about the U.S. commitment to Israel's future and security.

(PHOTOS: Hillary Clinton in Egypt)

That's on top of leading the administration's continuing calls for the ouster of Bashar Assad in Syria. The strategy largely reprises her role on Libya, pressing the hard line with Iran and handling the relationship with Russia through more diplomacy and negotiation than Romney and Republicans in Congress want.

"The things that drive the campaign agenda are going to overlap with the things that drive the White House agenda, so it's hardly a surprise that she would be traveling to the hot spots or engaging in the hot issues of the day," said Phil Singer, a spokesman and senior adviser for Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign. "It's obviously magnified when you're dealing with a foreign affairs dynamic, and it's doubly magnified when the person doing it is named Clinton."

The benefit for Obama's reelection is obvious, even if indirect, Singer said: "One of the amazing things about Hillary Clinton and all the Clintons is that they have a profound influence on electoral politics even when they are trying not to have a profound influence on electoral politics."

Many Democratic strategists are confused by the emphasis Romney is putting on foreign policy in what's widely seen as an economy election. But as long as Romney's making the argument, Clinton allies say Obama can thank his former rival for some of the votes he'll be getting in November.

"For all of my life, this might be the first campaign that we've gone into where Democrats are ahead on foreign policy," former Clinton political consultant James Carville said. "I was told before that it mattered when we were behind. She can take some credit for a political party that for a long time has been behind on a key element, that we're now ahead."

The Obama campaign declined to comment about any political value Clinton provides, and State Department spokesman Philippe Reines said the election isn't having any influence on Clinton's actions or travels.

"As she has for the last 3½ years, the secretary of state is doing her job executing the president's foreign policy," Reines said. "Her work both at home and around the world is vital to advancing U.S. interests, and continues unabated irrespective of the political calendar at home."

Former Sen. Jim Talent (R-Mo.), who's serving as a foreign policy adviser to Romney and joined the candidate for the England leg of the European trip, said the campaign is trying to connect Obama's international record to its larger theme of Obama as a failed president who's making the country weaker.

Clinton, Talent said, hasn't been a factor in this argument. But while Talent argued that the Romney campaign doesn't see a distinction between the secretary of state and the president they're pummeling, he approached the subject of Clinton cautiously.

"The administration's foreign policy is constitutionally the president's foreign policy — he's the one responsible for the decisions that are being made. And also, we don't know the internal debates within the administration on this position or that position," Talent said. "I think the governor honors Secretary Clinton's service and her dedication, but he doesn't agree with the policies of the administration she serves."

Clinton herself has steered clear of any engagement with the presidential campaign. She doesn't talk politics and won't be attending the Democratic National Convention next month.

Which isn't to say Clinton is oblivious to the fact that there's an election going on.

"She's very mindful of the politics, both domestically and internationally, even though she's obviously not involved in the day-to-day campaigning," said P.J. Crowley, the former assistant secretary of state for public affairs under Clinton.

Crowley said Clinton sees herself providing political benefits for Obama by creating what he calls a "feedback loop": Racking up more foreign policy wins boosts Obama and gives Romney ever narrower room to criticize.

Clinton didn't mention Obama, Romney or the election as she spoke to reporters after a day of meetings with Israeli leaders. Instead, she described her trip as geared "to reiterate our commitment to Israel's security, our investment in Israel's long-term future, making it clear we are connected on a deep level of shared values."

She touched on the delicate relationship with Egypt and a commitment to peace with the Palestinians "not through international venues or unilateral acts," in an allusion to the threatened United Nations membership vote. She talked of a dedication to preventing Iran

from obtaining nuclear weapons — all part of what the president wants Israel-focused voters to associate with him.

If not for her current role, Clinton could be out on the trail, helping Obama appeal to women and working-class voters. But each one of those rallies would risk inciting the “What if?” parlor games of an idealized alternate-universe Clinton presidency, as well as a new round of speculation about her prospects in replacing Joe Biden in the No. 2 spot or her prospects for 2016.

Her hold on the public imagination clearly continues — no need to look beyond her almost-portrayal in the new Sigourney Weaver television series (“Whether or not this president is trading on my popularity is not what matters now,” the character says at one point) or her cameo in one of Romney’s latest ads laying out a 2008 primary attack on Obama.

During a CNN interview that Clinton taped in Israel, she laughed off the ad appearance as “a waste of money.”

“Everybody knows I ran against President Obama in 2008; that’s hardly news. Everybody knows we ran a hard-fought campaign and he won. And I have been honored to serve as his secretary of state, working with him to advance America’s interests, values and securities,” Clinton said.

There’s a clear pattern in Clinton’s career: Her poll numbers go up when voters are thinking about her official work as first lady or senator or secretary but go down the moment she re-enters the political fray. There’s a sense from many political operatives that the broad approval she’s earned over the past four years might have enabled her to break free of that pattern, should she make another presidential run in 2016. Incredibly early polls, far from reliable or even very sensible at this point, already have her so far ahead of anyone else that the Democratic nomination seems hers for the taking.

That might help her in four years, but for now, that’s helping Obama, said Gina Glantz, who managed Bill Bradley’s 2000 campaign and was a senior aide to Howard Dean’s in 2004.

“Voters vote for presidents, they don’t vote for secretaries of state,” Glantz said, but “obviously, the extraordinary job she has done reflects well on the president, and the understanding of voters of foreign policy. It’s an undergirding of a good feeling toward the president.”