

Romney's defense budget target is lofty

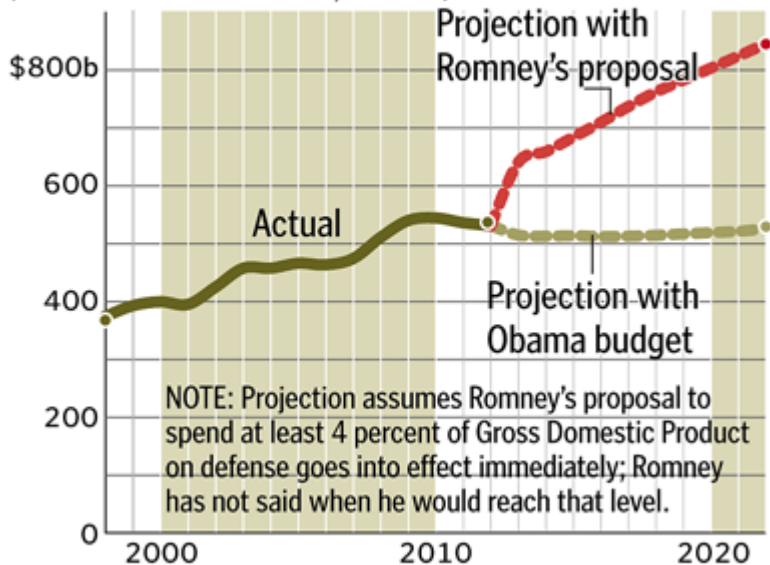
Analysts say goals will be hard to attain

By **Michael Kranish**
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WASHINGTON - It is one of Mitt Romney's most striking anecdotes. The US Navy, he says, has fewer ships today than in 1917, and the US Air Force is smaller than it was in 1947. Notwithstanding that today's fleets are far beyond the capability of those from yesteryear, Romney says it is evidence that America's military dominance is at risk.

PROJECTED DEFENSE SPENDING

Defense spending projections under Obama and Romney.
(in constant 2012 dollars, billions)



SOURCE: Cato Institute

GLOBE STAFF

Romney's solution is one of the most far-ranging, expensive, and perhaps least understood of his campaign. He has vowed to commit at least 4 percent of the nation's gross domestic product - \$4 out of every \$100 in the nation's economy - to "core" defense spending, not including many war expenses.

The cost appears to be far greater than when Romney first broached the idea several years ago, when the nation was spending closer to 4 percent of GDP on defense. Under next year's budget, defense spending is projected to be about 3.2 percent - yet Romney has stuck by his 4 percent vow. Put another way, that means Romney proposes spending 61 percent more than Obama at the end of a decade-long cycle, according to the libertarian Cato Institute.

Enacting such an increase at the same time that Romney wants to slash taxes and balance the budget could cost trillions of dollars and require huge cuts in domestic programs. As Romney's website puts it matter-of-factly, "This will not be a cost-free process."

An examination of Romney's plan, however, shows how difficult it will be for him to achieve his goal. Even some of Romney's advisers, while saying the Pentagon increases are essential, said in interviews that political and budgetary issues would probably make it impossible for Romney to increase defense spending to 4 percent of GDP in a first year - and tough even in a fourth year - of a presidency.

"No president in the next administration could take the defense budget to 4 percent in the next year," said Mackenzie Eaglen, a scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute who has advised Romney on the issue. "That's not a hard number and anybody would be crazy to suggest it is. It would have to be a very slow ramp-up and they would be hard-pressed to even achieve a 4 percent base budget by the end of the first term."

James Jay Carafano, a defense expert at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said that even if everyone agreed on the first day of a Romney presidency to the 4 percent proposal, it probably wouldn't be possible for several years due to lack of manufacturing capabilities. "If you look at the state of our industrial base, you couldn't spend 4 percent on the military if you wanted to," Carafano said. "People couldn't build the ships and planes fast enough."

Romney has not been clear about when he would reach his goal of spending at least 4 percent of the nation's economy on defense. His website describes a "floor of 4

percent” as a “goal.” His spokeswoman, Andrea Saul, said via e-mail that 4 percent is a “target.”

In a statement, Saul said, “For his first term, Governor Romney has committed to reversing Obama-era defense cuts,” which she said would be “offset by cuts to other parts of the budget.” That suggests that Romney would not get to his target until a prospective second term.

Beyond the question of how and when Romney could achieve his goal is the broader debate about whether the nation’s military dominance is at risk, a subject that could be a major dividing line in a general election campaign.

Romney is correct in noting that core defense spending is slated to fall as a percentage of GDP if war costs are not included, analysts said. Obama has proposed a 2013 Pentagon budget of \$525 billion, a \$6 billion cut from a year earlier, according to the Office of Management and Budget. Romney has vowed to restore the cuts and increase spending.

But Obama campaign officials said that calculating the spending as a percentage of the nation’s economy does not tell the whole story, noting that, after next year, the defense budget is slated to increase in dollar terms.

“Thanks to the president and his foreign policy accomplishments, our nation is stronger and more secure than it was when he took office. The bottom line remains the same - we have the strongest military in the world and that won’t change,” Obama campaign spokesman Kara Carscaden said. She said that Romney’s proposal for spending 4 percent of GDP on defense is an “arbitrary” figure that shows he is “pandering to his Republican base . . . without giving a reason for the increase.”

But Romney has said the military need is paramount. He has said the Pentagon is so devastated by cutbacks that the country risks losing its status as the preeminent power in the world. Indeed, a Gallup Poll released last week found that only 54 percent of those surveyed believe the United States has the world’s leading military, the lowest ranking in 13 years.

While proposing the increased spending, Romney has portrayed himself as perhaps the most hawkish candidate in the field.

He has vowed that Iran won’t have a nuclear weapon if he is president, and has questioned Obama’s timetable for withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan.

Speaking to voters recently in Michigan, Romney said that Obama's cuts would leave the military decimated, citing as proof a comparison to decades ago.

"I'm not willing to pass on an America where the military has been shrunk by this president - where we've gone from the capacity to fight two wars down to only one - with a Navy that's smaller, with an Air Force that's smaller," Romney said. "I mean, do you know the state of our military? I mean, do you realize we have fewer ships in our Navy than any time since 1917, and yet this president wants to slow down the purchases of ships? Do you know our Air Force is older and smaller than any time since 1947, when it was formed?"

Politifact, the Pulitzer-winning fact check website, recently gave Romney's assertion that the military is being decimated its lowest "truth-o-meter" rating: "pants on fire."

While the site did not quibble with the ship and plane numbers that Romney cited, it echoed a number of independent analysts in noting that today's sophisticated fleets can't be compared to those of many years ago.

"Romney's numbers simply don't add up," said Paul Pillar, the CIA's former national intelligence officer for the Near East and South Asia.

Like a number of analysts, Pillar questioned how Romney can increase defense spending so dramatically while also promising to slash the deficit.

Christopher Preble, who analyzes defense issues for the Cato Institute and has studied Romney's defense proposal, said it is misleading for Romney to suggest that the US military strength is at risk by comparing today's military to that of long ago.

"We are spending roughly half of the military spending in the world. So presumably he is looking at polls and I guess expects that people will reward him for pledging to maintain a military second to none, skipping past the unfortunate truth that we already are," Preble said. "At a minimum it is misleading and it does raise questions about the governor's understanding of this problem."

Romney, in citing his figures on ships and planes, relied upon a report written by Eaglen, who outlined the information in a 2010 study that she wrote for the Heritage Foundation. Her study said that the Navy had 245 ships at the end of 1916 and had 283 in 2009.

It is not, of course, an apples-to-apples comparison. The Navy of 1916 did not even contain a category for aircraft carriers, while the current fleet has 11.

Asked in an interview if it made sense for Romney to compare today's fleet to the number of ships from nearly a century ago in making his argument for increased military spending, Eaglen said that it is appropriate as long as context is provided.

She said it should be obvious that ships and crew are more capable than years ago, but said it is also true that more ships are needed to cover the earth's waters.

"One ship, one aircraft, or one brigade can only be in one place at one time around the world," she said. "So even with sophisticated technologies and people in the military, numbers still matter. A lot of deterring is achieved through physical presence of these assets. Quantity has a quality all its own."

Romney, on his campaign website, suggests that the current fleet should be expanded by 44 ships, although he does not commit himself to that number.

Similarly, Romney said the country needs to increase the number of aircraft as well as military personnel, all of which would require heavy new expenditures.

Romney's challenge could be even greater if Congress fails to pass legislation this year that reverses further cuts that are slated to go into effect.

Under a process known as sequestration, the defense budget could be cut over a 10-year period beginning next January by about \$500 billion, which Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has opposed on grounds it would have a "serious impact" on maintaining national security.

Those cuts are slated to be automatic because last year's congressional supercommittee on the deficit failed to reach a budget deal.

The matter could wind up being one of the first issues faced by whoever is elected president this November.

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