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Obama and Romney differ on wars, spending

BY NICK HASSETT | OCTOBER 19, 2012

Though President Obama and GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney have sparred on foreign policy and defense spending already, the barbs are sure to come out again in the Oct. 22 debate.

The candidates traded words in several direct confrontations during Tuesday night's debate, and their heated exchanges set the stage for the upcoming confrontation, which will focus on foreign policy and will allow the candidates more time to speak.

One aspect of foreign policy that may be discussed is defense spending. In the most recent presidential debate, Obama claimed that Romney would add \$2 trillion to the defense budget, an increase he said the military has not asked for.

Romney's campaign website states his plan to set defense spending at a minimum of 4 percent of GDP. Based on the 2011 U.S. GDP, Romney's plan would call for at least \$603 billion in defense spending.

A U.S. Department of Defense representative, who wished to remain anonymous because she is an active-duty, said the military takes seriously its obligation to defend the nation with the resources it has.

"If you are told you have a \$30,000 budget to live on, you can live on that and make adjustments," she said. "But if you are offered a \$60,000 budget, you can afford a lot more of what you want."

She said the military would make "excellent use" of an increased budget, though it has already planned around a reduced budget under the president's plan.

However, one expert with the Cato Institute said increases in military spending were not necessary.

"The U.S. is remarkably secure," said Christopher Preble, the vice president for defense and foreign-policy studies at the institute. "Increasing spending when we are winding down wars doesn't make much sense to me. It raises the question:

what will this spending be used on? Will we be fighting more Iraq and Afghanistan kind of wars or something larger, like Iran?"

The total cost of the war in Afghanistan is approximately \$576 billion, according to the National Priorities Project, a Massachusetts research organization that analyzes federal data.

In the Oct 11. vice-presidential debate, Vice President Joe Biden iterated the Obama administration's goal to end the war in Afghanistan by 2014 saying, "We are leaving in 2014. Period."

Richard Mansbach, a political-science professor at Iowa State University, said the American people are tired of the war in Afghanistan.

"[The Afghanistan war] is the longest war in American history," he said. "People are asking, why are we there? It's a war that's unwinnable, though very much losable."

However, Mansbach also believes setting a date for the end of the war could backfire, emboldening the Taliban.

"If you want to 'win,' the last thing you should do is say you'll be out by 2014," he said. "That could make the process very difficult."

It's a view that the Romney-Ryan campaign shares.

"We don't want to broadcast to our enemies 'put a date on your calendar, wait us out, and then come back,' " GOP vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan said during the debate.

Preble said Obama might have an edge on foreign policy, given Romney's positions.

"The experiences in the last 10 years have really soured Americans," he said. "As someone that identifies more with the GOP, it disappoints me to say that foreign policy doesn't really play into their strengths."